

## The Partnership Plan by [midnighteverlark](#)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Bi-Curiosity, Bisexual Mike Wheeler, Bisexuality, College, Coming Out, Developing Relationship, Eventual Smut, Fake/Pretend Relationship, Falling In Love, Feel-good, Fluff, Friends With Benefits, Friends to Lovers, Gay Will Byers, HIV/AIDS Crisis, Heteronormativity, Idiots in Love, Implied/Referenced Self-Harm, Internalized Homophobia, Love Confessions, M/M, Mostly a feel-good fic, No Season 3, Period-Typical Homophobia, Queer awakening, Relationship of Convenience, Swearing, Toxic Masculinity, getting over mental blocks, just plain, not much angst, not sure, past trauma, probably, some but not much, which turns into

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**Characters:** Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Will Byers & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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**Summary:**

“What exactly are you proposing here?”

“A - partnership,” Will gets out. “Of sorts. A safety net. Companionship. Shared resources,” he repeats, harping on that phrase because he feels like it’s the most logical, pragmatic argument he has in his arsenal. And then he swallows, and his voice loses some of its rehearsed steel and blunt practicality as he says, “Affection. Support. A shoulder to cry on without judgement, if you ever need it. A hand to hold.” Deep breath in. Hot blood rushing through his cheeks. “Kissing, if you want it. Sex, if you want it.”

As the AIDS epidemic runs rampant, and the Party is about to leave for college, Will makes a decision. He will not spend his entire life

wondering over what-ifs. He needs closure. He needs an answer, once and for all. So he offers Mike a proposition: pool their resources. Split costs. Lean on each other. Rely on each other. Be faithful to each other - and, thus, be shielded from the threat of AIDS entirely.

Mike is straight. He thinks. But Will has some very good points, and if Mike went there with anyone... it would be Will. Plus, this isn't forever. It's just a temporary precaution. A mutually beneficial arrangement, for however long they need. Right?

# 1. The Proposition

## Author's Note:

HELP ME MY MUSE IS OUT OF CONTROL.  
Look. LOOK. I KNOW. I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO BE  
STARTING MORE STORIES.  
BUT I GUESS I AM. (Flips table)

October 1988

Here is Will's thinking.

He refuses to spend his whole life wondering. He's spent enough of it doing that already, and he cannot - *will not* spend the whole rest of his life pining after Michael fucking Wheeler. He needs an answer. He needs closure. He needs - no matter how scared he is, no matter how miserable it makes him to consider the possibility of their friendship ending in a pillar of flames - to *ask*.

Because he knows, he *knows* that if he just continues to carry on the way he has been, he'll keep doing it forever. He knows himself well enough to know that. If he never does anything about it, if he never asks, he'll spend his whole life wondering if maybe things could have been different. And he refuses to consign himself to that fate. He can barely stand the perpetual teeter-totter anymore, it's driving him nuts. It's been driving him nuts - and making him stressed and anxious and miserable - for years. And he can't face a whole lifetime of that.

So, here are his options. Either Will can shut his mouth and keep his thoughts to himself, like he has been for his whole life, and he and Mike will go to college, probably in different states, and drift apart, and eventually they'll have separate adult lives and jobs and dogs and apartments and significant others, and he will always wonder. He'll *always* be haunted by that what-if.

Or. His other option, and the one he intends to pursue, if he can just muster the courage.

Will can ask. He can... offer.

He can tell Mike what he feels, what he wants, what he could *give*, and then... Then it's just a matter of seeing what happens. Because then, the way Will figures, one of two paths will unfold.

The most likely scenario is that Will's heart breaks. Mike turns him down. Maybe roughly, maybe gently. Maybe he'll sneer or spit or back away, maybe even yell, or maybe he'll be soft, tender, brushing away Will's tears as he says, *Will, no. You know I can't. You know you can't have that.* And any of that would be fine, any of that would be *good*, because then Will could pick up the pieces of his heart and *move on*. He would be a little broken, for a while - more so if Mike yelled or hit him or called him ugly names. And then, whether it took weeks or months, he'd heal. And he'd be able to cut ties and move on. He'd be able to finally, *finally* put that lingering possibility to bed. He could finally close that door behind him, bury the coffin, mourn, and move forward with his life. Unhindered by loose threads, unburdened by the relentless wishing, wondering, hoping. He'd *know*, for absolutely certain. And he'd go to college and make new friends and maybe even get a boyfriend, and make new memories with new people in a new place, and he'd go on with his life.

Or, the other path. The far less likely path. Impossible, even. But one he *has* to try, if only to cross it off his list. He just has to know that it wouldn't work. Definitively.

This path is one where Mike accepts his offer. Where Will gets a partner. Where he gets *Mike* as a partner. Where he gets his wish - even if it's only for a little while. Mike might agree to give it a try, for a few months, and then renege on the deal when it gets too much for him, too weird.

And that would be fine too. Because, again: closure. Reset to Outcome A. Heartbreak. Healing. Closure. Moving forward. If they try and it doesn't work, at least Will would have *tried*, and, well, there's his answer again. He just needs an *answer*.

All of this hit him in a sort of moment of clarity - part of the exhausted fallout after an autumn-induced panic attack, late one night. At first it was more daydream than idea. Just an intriguing

thought to pursue and turn over in his hands, the shape of it at once sharp and comfortable, dangerous and enticing. But the more he thought about it - slowly, over days and then weeks - the less it felt like a daydream and the more it felt like an idea.

And then it started to feel like a plan.

And then, after a period of paralyzed, keyed-up indecisiveness - does he even dare to hope? - he started to plan for real.

And now, though he can barely believe he's doing it, he's putting his plan into action.

On the day he means to say it, to give his confession and make his offer, he dresses just a little nicer than usual. He makes sure he looks pretty good - not *fancy*, just. Good. Put-together. Maybe even attractive. If he's going to offer this, offer *himself* to Mike, he wants to be appealing. Maybe not handsome, exactly, maybe that's too much to hope for, but... Competent. Collected. Clear-eyed and steady. So he makes *sure* he actually sleeps enough, the night before, and he doesn't drink too many cups of coffee so that his hands wouldn't shake, and he chooses his outfit carefully, and he even styles his hair a little.

And then he chickens out, and never says any of it, and the day passes without incident.

Three days later, when his mom and brother are guaranteed to be at work all day, he resets himself and tries again. Sleeping late in the morning. Only one cup of coffee. A call to the Wheeler house - could Mike come over today? Soon? Now? Great.

Shower.

Carefully selected outfit - nothing too outside his usual rotation, but something newer, something without frayed hems or stains, something that actually fits him. Not slightly overlarge hand-me-downs from Jonathan. Wrinkle-free slacks and a button-up that he knows suits his frame well.

Just a *touch* of styling gel in his hair.

Sweaty palms, aching stomach. Mike will be here any minute.

Pacing. Waiting.

And then there's Mike on the porch, and this time... This time Will opens the door with a deep breath and says, "Can I talk to you?" before Mike can even say hi.

No backing out this time. Now he started it. Now Mike will want to know what's going on. Now he has to finish it.

So he makes them both tea - resisting the urge to pour himself coffee instead - and sits a baffled Mike down at the kitchen table, and starts with, "Don't answer yet. Take a few days. Take a few weeks, even. But I... I have a..." He gropes for words, hands drifting in front of him, and then clasps them together as if to steady himself and settles on, "Proposition."

Mike's brows are furrowed. He can tell something is up, something big, and he's worried. But not worried enough to question it, yet. He takes a tiny sip of his scalding tea. "Okay..."

"Well. So."

How does he start? He's made this whole speech so many times in his head, and somehow he can't remember how he ever started it. His pulse is racing, blood rushing through him, making him as shaky and fidgety as the caffeine would have. He can't believe he's doing this. Is he going to do this? Is he really going to do this? Or will his courage fail at the last second?

He starts the only way he can stomach it: by skirting around the real topic. Circling it without touching it.

"AIDS," Will says, and, wow, what a stellar opening, William. Way to go. He pushes through. "It's... I mean, you've heard. We've talked about it before, it... You can't go a day without hearing about it somehow. You know. News. Rumors. It's... It's scary. It's dangerous. Like, really, *actually* dangerous."

Mike nods along, more concerned now than he was at the start. Probably because of the gravity to Will's voice. This isn't Will's usual

speech pattern. This isn't Will just having a conversation, saying things as they come to mind. He has an agenda here, he has a point, and he knows Mike can tell. It makes butterflies the size of pigeons swarm in his stomach.

"Lots of people have died," he goes on, even though he knows Mike knows that. He just feels the need to reiterate it, impress it upon his best friend. It's a key pillar to his entire line of reasoning, a core component of his whole mindset here. "It's, like, a real, actual threat. Even here." *Here*, meaning, Hawkins. "Like last spring. That middle school teacher that caught it. You know. Word got out, parents were panicking and threatening to pull their kids out of school, you remember."

Mike nods again. Of course they remember. That teacher wasn't back this fall.

"Or the guy on your street."

Another nod. Mike is starting to look like a bobblehead.

The guy lives a few doors down from the Wheelers. He went away for college - and then he came back home because he caught it. He and his family have been struggling to pay for medical bills and figure out what they're going to do, and Mike has said before that everyone is a little afraid to approach that house anymore.

"Getting together with people is really dangerous right now," Will sums up, lamely, and Mike gives a final solemn nod and then sips his tea. Bobblehead mode completed and deactivated.

Will wipes sweaty palms on the knees of his slacks. Here it comes. One more step towards the point of no return. Once he says this, Mike will want to know why. It will be much harder to abort mission if he takes this next step. "Can I ask you something personal?"

Mike looks a little taken aback, but barely hesitates to say, "Yeah, 'course."

Will swallows past the pounding heart in his throat. When that doesn't work he tries sipping his tea to wash it down. When he

lowers the cup, he takes the plunge. "Have you slept with anyone?"

Mike goes red. He looks at the Byers' wall calendar, addressing the Cute Dog o' the Month to say, "Oh. Uh. No."

"Yeah, me neither," Will says. "And that's how it transmits, right? So... the both of us should be safe."

Mike looks back at him, embarrassed, confused - curious - and says, "Yeah, should be."

And Will's knee is bouncing, and he's claspings his hands hard to keep them still, and his blood is rushing in his ears as he abruptly blurts, "Look, I need... I really just need to -" A vague, meaningless gesture. Restless and twitchy. "Talk. Explain. Just - just let me explain, for a while, and don't... Please don't say anything. Until after. Because I'm really not good at this and it's, I'm, I'm gonna fuck it up, so I just need to talk through it until it kind of makes sense. Okay? So just... hear me out."

And Mike opens his mouth, closes it, blinks those dark eyes at Will, and the nods, once.

And Will nods back, and takes a deep breath, and makes his speech. Or at least, as best as he can. He makes the best case for himself, for *them*, as he can. Looking at the table between them most of the time, because he doesn't want to look away - he wants Mike to be able to see his face during this - but meeting Mike's eyes right now is out of the question.

"I want to offer a proposition," he says again. "Consider it a... business proposition of sorts. A partnership." His ears burn, saying that word, like, *that's it, that's the magic word, you've really committed to this now*. "We'll be in college next year, and we'll probably want to. Ah. You know. Just, it would be really easy to get it. AIDS."

Okay. Okay. He's doing okay. Take a sip of tea, slow down, don't breathe so fast. Breathe between words. Don't hyperventilate or this whole thing is ruined.

"And," he continues, a little more smoothly now that he remembered



to breathe, “I’m an, well, I’d like to be an artist. I want to study that. In college. And who knows if I’ll ever make a career out of it, but it’s not like I’m ever gonna end up in one of those high-paying jobs, you know? I’m not really planning on being a doctor or going into business anytime soon.”

All right. This isn’t so bad. Mike is tuned in now, leaning back in his chair slightly as he listens, clearly unsure where Will is going with all of this but -

But he’s *listening*. And, so far, Will isn’t completely incomprehensible. If he just keeps going, keeps moving forward, maybe he can ramble his way through. Maybe he can really do it.

“And I know you’ve said you might want to be a writer. Or do *something* creative. And that’s hard. I mean, people - adults, mostly I mean - they’re always saying it.”

“Why don’t you look at some *productive* majors?” Mike whines, imitating the tones of a woman - maybe his mother, maybe a school counselor. Then he lifts his hands. “Sorry. Not saying anything.”

Will chuckles. “S’okay. And that’s it, exactly. Clearly we’ve both heard it a lot. And I mean, they’re not *wrong*, it is... not easy to get by on that kind of career.” He gives a kind of sideways nod. “Unless... there were two of us.”

That makes Mike shift. He sits forward a little, elbows braced on his knees as he holds his mug between his hands.

Will measures out his words. “Two small incomes can support two people better than one small income can support one. They were saying that in the godawful business and finance class I had to take last year. Shared expenses make all the difference. Apparently. Shared rent, shared groceries.” He swirls his tea, gazing into his mug as an excuse not to meet Mike’s eyes. “Pooling resources could make it possible for us to actually do what interests us. For a living.”

Mike shifts, lips parting like he’s about to say something, but then he remembers and closes his mouth again, nodding for Will to go on with a pensive little frown between his brows.

Will is getting ahead of himself. Rent, groceries. That's the future. That's too far in the future to be thinking about, too far to be *talking* about. He's going to scare Mike away before he ever gets to the important part.

College.

Start with college.

"But," he says, flicking a hand as if flicking away all of what he just said, "That's not... That's... later. But *college*. You know? Next year. Shit, can you believe we'll be in college a year from now?"

"No," Mike says, cracking a smile.

Will snorts. "Me either." Refocus. Think. This is the critical part. "Okay. So. What's the stereotype about college students?"

"Poor," Mike says immediately. "Ramen noodles. Jumping at free food. Getting stupid drunk at frat parties."

"Poor and miserable," Will confirms. "It's such an accepted truth that it's a *joke*. But maybe not if we work as a team. Like I said. Shared resources."

Mike's thinking it over. He's really thinking about it. Will can tell by the far-off look in his eyes, the tilt of his head. And that's a good start. If he's considering this, maybe, just *maybe* he'll consider the rest. Even just for a moment.

"Cause, your parents have been threatening not to help you out with college money if you don't -"

"Choose a *useful* major?" Mike says, putting air quotes around the offending word. He rolls his eyes. "Yup, they're still on that."

"So... fuck it. Let them withdraw their help. I don't have any college savings anyway, or at least, *barely*. But we could make it together, maybe. Like, we don't have to be *roommates* or anything..." In fact it might be better, healthier if they each have their own dorm, at first. "... but we could go to the same college, or at least the same city."

He's getting uncomfortably, terrifyingly close to the real truth of the conversation, the *real* reason he's saying all of this, and he feels a little faint. His throat feels tight. Is he starting to have an episode? No, he doesn't think so. But he has to stop and drain the last of his tea before he goes on, fingers cold, every nerve in his body on edge.

*Here it comes. Here it is. The event horizon.*

"We could support each other. You know, through the move and the life changes and the..." Will waves a hand around. "We'd watch each other's backs. Make sure we don't get alcohol poisoning or get stranded alone in a strange part of the city." He laughs a strained, nervous laugh, but it does nothing to dispel the tension he's putting off and that Mike is clearly picking up on. There's a gravity to his tone that blows his cover, gives this away as much more than a simple offer of buddies going to college together. "Carpool. Share groceries. Pool tuition money. Help each other study. Be there for each other. We could just... watch out for each other. Like we always have."

And that's the point where Mike breaks his vow of silence, his voice wavering just a little bit as he cuts in to say, "What," and Will can tell he's choosing his words very carefully, calculating which tone to use. "- exactly are you..." He mimics Will's gesture. "*Proposing* here?"

"A - partnership," Will gets out, rubbing his lips together afterwards as he regrets how clumsy the word was. "Of sorts. A safety net. Companionship. Shared resources," he repeats, harping on that phrase because he feels like it's the most logical, the most pragmatic argument he has in his arsenal. And then he swallows, and his voice loses some of its rehearsed steel and blunt practicality as he says, "Affection. Support. A shoulder to cry on without judgement, if you ever need it. A hand to hold." Deep breath in. Hot blood rushing through his cheeks. "Kissing, if you want it. Sex, if you want it."

And he's not looking at Mike, he couldn't look at Mike if he tried, but in his peripheral vision he sees Mike do a funny little shudder-jump.

"Only if you want it," he assures, his voice thin, barely more than a whisper because it's all he can manage. "And - only as long as you want. I'm not - you know. I'm not asking for your whole *life* here, I

just. If we try for a month and it's not - if we try for a *week* and it's not working, or it's not what you want, okay. If we go all the way through college -" *Or further*, he thinks - "Okay. The moment you say you're done, we're done. No questions asked."

Mike processes this, eyes slightly glazed as they track back and forth across the tabletop, his entire head red as a fire engine. And then, a little clumsily himself, he ventures, "... you want to be boyfriends."

He only hitches slightly on the last word, but Will hears it, and he stumbles to amend, "Partners," as if that makes all the difference. "You don't have to..." His shoulders do a strange, stilted wriggling motion, like he was trying to shrug and forgot how. "Be in love with me or anything, I... I don't... expect that. But... We make a good team. Don't we?" The last two words are quiet, almost pleading, and Will hates himself for it.

He's bracing himself for the rejection, tensing in preparation for the slap to the face he knows is coming, whether literal or figurative. He's almost looking forward to it. It'll be cathartic to cry, he thinks. He can already feel it coming. He made it through the speech by virtue of adrenaline alone, and now the jittering energy in his veins has given way to a shaky, watery, emotional exhaustion. It'll feel good to cry. It'll hurt, hearing whatever Mike is about to say, but he's already looking forward to the release. Sometimes you have to destroy something to build something new, and the destruction can have a certain pleasure to it, too. And he's already done the hard part. He just has to wait, and listen, and see exactly how bad Mike's reaction is.

But then, so quietly that Will almost didn't realize he had spoken, Mike says, "We do."

Will looks up, meeting Mike's eyes for the first time since he was talking about groceries and watching out for each other. There's fear in Mike's eyes, in his face, etched in the hard lines of his hunched back and shoulders. But there's something else there, too.

"But I," Mike says, and Will looks down again.

There it is. There's that *but*.

Mike's voice lowers again. Quieter and quieter, as if he can barely make himself say the words. "I'm not... I don't think I'm gay."

*Think?*

"I know," Will manages, past the lump in his throat. "I'm not saying you are."

Mike flounders for a moment, mouth opening and closing. He's been holding his mug halfway to his mouth, but he hasn't sipped from it in several minutes. Will wonders if he realizes he's holding it. "Don't you want some- don't you want a real partner? Someone who... I mean... Wouldn't you want a guy who could actually love you?"

Will flinches, just a little, at that first explicit acknowledgement of his own queerness. So, Mike does know. He did know, all these years, or for who knows how long. Or at least, he suspected, and this conversation was enough to tip his suspicion into confirmation.

Well. In for a penny, in for a pound. If he's doing this, he's going to *do* this. And with the fresh wave of chattering, electric, numbing adrenaline in his blood, maybe he'll even have the courage to go through with it.

Will breathes, breathes, clenches his jaw against the mist in his eyes, and then looks up and meets Mike's gaze with a hard determination. "Do you love me?"

"Will," Mike says, almost gasps, almost laughs, almost sobs, tone completely indiscernible.

"Do you love me?" Will insists. Throat shaking, fingers shaking, everything shaking. "I don't mean *in* love, I mean love."

A tear streaks down Mike's face, and Will wonders why, he wonders exactly what this conversation is stirring up inside of Mike. If it feels anything like what Will feels. Like a hurricane. Like a wildfire. Like freefall and tightrope walking all at once. "Fuck," Mike chokes, finally putting down the mug and dropping his head into his hands, fingers raking through his hair. "Yes. Fuck, Will, you -"

"I love you."

Mike's shoulders are shaking.

"Mike, I love you." And his voice is so *raw*, so *full* of emotion, but he hasn't cried a single tear yet. "And I trust you. And I *know* you. And I'm not saying forever. It's not like this thing would be a." He laughs, just as raw, sniffing a little now. "A lifelong commitment or something. Just... It's bad right now, Mikey. It's really bad. I've been hearing things, the news, people, they're scared, and I know you've heard it too. You don't know who might have it and who doesn't, and - and I don't want to fucking die from AIDS, okay? And I don't want you to, either. And we'd be safe, together."

He's reaching across the table, compulsively, stupidly, awkwardly snagging one of Mike's hot, sweaty hands in his own cold clammy one. The angle is all wrong, the grip wrong. He's holding the side of Mike's hand, bunching his fingers uncomfortably, but *Mike isn't pulling away*, and Will thinks his heart might beat right out of his chest. Could he...? Is he...?

"We could keep each other safe. While this thing is happening. We could... wait out the storm together. We'd be completely safe from all that, we'd protect each other, and we wouldn't have to be alone, and -" There are the tears, finally. "We could take care of each other. We've always -" Little gasp, little swallow. Compulsive, out of his control. "We've always taken care of each other."

There's a long, long, long silence.

Will wrestles down his tears, evens out his breathing with the practice of one who has become adept at having silent flashbacks and panic attacks in public restrooms and then putting themselves back together and walking out with a smile. He can't be a blubbing mess for this if he wants *any* chance of Mike taking him seriously, any chance of Mike considering this. He has to be mature. He has to be worthy.

*See, I can be steady*, he thinks, acutely aware of how their damp, shaking hands are still touching, and Will isn't squeezing anymore but Mike isn't moving away, either. *I can be reliable. I would be a reliable partner. I would be a good partner. Think about what I've offered. Think about what I could do for you. I could help you through college. We*

*could help each other through college. And if we stayed together long enough... we could afford rent together so much more easily. Less money stress. More free time. More freedom. We could make each other's lives better. I'd help you through your breakdowns. I know you have them too. I'd keep you warm at night, if you wanted. I'd split what I have fifty-fifty. You can have half of everything that I own, and all of everything that I am. I'd be your sounding board. I'd kiss you whenever you wanted, if you wanted. I know you like kisses. I know you miss them. You've told me. Shit, I'd blow you if you wanted. Whenever. Regularly. There's so much I can offer you. I have so much love to give, if you'd just...*

"I -" Mike says, punching through Will's thoughts and making his eyes flash open. "I need..." He takes an unsteady suck of air, finally pulling his hand away, leaving Will's fingers even colder. "I need to think."

Will nods, almost frantic in his need to show Mike he's not pushing. "Yeah," he croaks. "Of course. However long you... I mean, preferably not *months*, but..."

He trails off with a nervous chuckle, and Mike waffles like there's something else he was going to say, but after a moment he just says, "I'll, uh. I'll. See you." And leaves the kitchen without a backward glance.

Will doesn't follow him. He just listens to the sounds of Mike pulling on his shoes from beside the door and making his escape out into the clear October day.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So, uh... new story, I guess. XD  
Somebody stop my muse.

As always, I love to hear your thoughts! :D

## 2. The Answer

October 1988

*Monday*

Mike barely thinks about it - *can't* think about it - for over three days.

He goes about his business like nothing ever happened. He shows up to school on Monday with his stomach churning, but Will doesn't say a thing. In fact, he seems so absurdly normal that Mike has a moment of confused disbelief where he wonders if Saturday happened at all. Will greets him with the same smile and *hey* as always, not a moment of hesitance or a shade of uncertainty in his voice to hint at what happened. They talk about school and projects in the hall before first bell. They eat lunch with the Party and have Calculus together. And still, Will doesn't crack. Not one meaningful glance. Not one false tone or absentminded moment of anxiousness. He seems as casual as ever, eating his packed lunch and scribbling out last-minute homework with an unbothered ease that both baffles Mike and makes him a little jealous. Why can't he compartmentalize like that? Life would be so much easier if he could.

And suddenly Mike wonders if this is just Will's default setting. Maybe it's not that Mike imagined their conversation, or that Will is totally unbothered; maybe it's just that Will is a much better actor than Mike thought.

Maybe this is normal.

Maybe Will has been acting every day of his life for years. Acting like everything is fine, like nothing happened, nothing is wrong.

How like Will.

How troublingly, infuriatingly typical of him.

Because if no one knows anything is wrong, no one can treat him differently for it. No one will walk on eggshells or treat him like he's



fragile if they don't know they're treading on a minefield. Mike wonders just how many mines have gone off without anyone ever knowing, because Will kept the explosion inside, never letting it reach the surface, packing it away to deal with later.

Maybe Will is just a lot better at hiding things than Mike.

Because the other option is that nothing *did* happen, and Saturday was some bizarre dream or delusion on Mike's part. He might almost believe it, except for his tongue. He scalded the tip of his tongue on the tea, when Will marched him into the Byers' kitchen and shattered Mike's sense of normalcy in the space of ten minutes.

The tip of his tongue is still a little numb. Tingling and tender, healing. But it's there. It happened. He was there, in that kitchen, sipping that tea. Hearing Will say everything that he said.

Including the one unbelievable thing.

*I love you.*

*Mike, I love you. And I trust you. And I know you. And -*

*Stop*, he commands his own brain, hands fisting in the material of his sweatshirt. *Stop. I can't.*

But it doesn't stop. It plays that moment over again.

*Do you love me?*

*Will.*

*Do you love me? I don't mean in love, I mean love.*

*Fuck. Yes. Fuck, Will, you -*

*I love you*, Will had said, cutting him off. Cutting off the rest of his sentence, which was going to be something along the lines of, *Fuck, Will, you know that. How could you not know that? I didn't exactly expect you to ask, to make me say it, but Jesus fucking Christ, yes, I love you. How could I not? You're my best friend. You're the most important person in the world to me, apart from my sisters. Yes, I love you. I just*

*never thought I'd have to say it.*

And the scary thing is, out of everything - *everything* that Will said that day - that one little sentence might be what comes closest to convincing him.

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*Wednesday*

Mike spins in his desk chair, not doing his homework. Outside, the sky is a light gray and a few halfhearted spits of rain dot the sidewalks.

He shouldn't be considering it. He shouldn't even be *thinking* about it. And yet, here he is.

The thing is, Will's argument makes *so much damn sense*.

And if he was going to do this with anyone... he'd do it with Will.

But won't it taint him, somehow? People say it's a slippery slope. What if he does this, gets into this kind of... relationship with Will, and it chips away at his ability to be...

He doesn't know. Normal? That's not quite what he means. Just, what if he does this with Will, makes a commitment with Will... kisses Will... and what if he doesn't want to stop? What if he doesn't want to go back? Would it ruin him? What if it ruins his life somehow? Or is that just his mother in his head? No marriage, no kids, no white picket fence - but did he really want any of that anyway?

But, no. Ruin his life? No marriage, *ever* ? He's being melodramatic. Too black-and-white.

And anyway, that's not the most pressing issue here. That's all down the road. Way down the road. What he *should* be worried about right now is that Will is a *guy*.

Mike likes girls. Not guys. He's not gay.

But.

But he'd be lying if he said he's never thought about Will like that.

It's an awful admission. It makes him *feel* awful, makes him feel dirty, almost. Like earthworms have taken up residence in his gut. If the thought had come up last week he would have rejected it out of hand.

But then, it wouldn't have come up last week, would it? It's something he has a *lot* of practice ignoring. He knew. On some level, somehow, he knew that he looks at Will, *thinks* about Will just a little differently than the other guys. He's known for years. Just... not quite consciously. He had pushed it too far down, ignored and denied it too thoroughly. If you repeat something often enough, eventually you believe it. And Mike had told himself the same story, so often, for so long, that for a long time he entirely forgot that it wasn't the truth.

*Of course I don't look at Will like that, he's a guy. He just has pretty eyes.*

*Of course I don't want to hold Will's hand, that's fucking gay. He just gets jumpy in the dark and there's a blackout.*

*Weird dream. Really fucking weird. Not my fault I woke up with a boner, blame my brain for serving me up images of a naked person sitting in my lap. Even if it was my male best friend. Dream logic. Nothing ever makes sense in dreams.*

*Of course I got him a card for Valentine's Day, we've been doing that since we were five. It's tradition. And just in case nobody else gets him something, I want to make sure he gets something from me. I don't want him to be sad.*

*Of course I love Will. Not in a gay way, obviously.*

He pretended so hard, for so long, that he forgot he had been pretending in the first place. But then, Saturday.

*Do you love me?*

*Will.*

*Do you love me? I don't mean in love, I mean love.*

*Fuck. Yes. Fuck, Will, you -*

*I love you.*

Just like that. Ten seconds. In a handful of seconds, Will reached out and ripped a hole straight through the convenient, presentable curtain Mike had hung up in his own mind. And it all came flooding back. All of it. Every time he ignored or pushed aside his own thoughts, rejected them and tossed them aside and explained them away because they didn't fit the narrative in his own head. Every time he stared at Will just a little too long or had an impulse to reach for him that was just a little too strong. All those times he scolded himself, *God, Mike, don't do that to him. Don't think that about him. He doesn't need that. What's wrong with you?*

And Mike *is not* gay, he swears he's not. He likes girls. A lot. He likes their long hair and their curves and their soft breasts and their voices and the way their hands move.

Mike likes girls. There's no question about that. He's not gay. It's just that this is *Will*. And he has always had a weak spot for Will. A special place for Will in his heart. And... he supposes things just got mixed up. He got some wires crossed in his brain. He doesn't usually like guys. He's not like that. He doesn't think about guys that way, not in general, it's just that...

Does he want this with Will? Even though he's a guy?

And then, a far more dangerous thought: does it matter?

He's not sure. He can't think. He can't *think*, he just keeps going in circles and getting caught and finding more circles to get caught in, and it's all too much.

*Deal with the devil*, his mother's voice whispers in his head. *Never worth it.*

Except this isn't the devil. This isn't some queer trying to lure Mike into sin. Well, he supposes technically it is, but it's also *Will*, and that makes it different. Will isn't just some queer. And he's not trying to hurt Mike. He's not trying to pull him into some toxic or ruinous

scheme. He's not trying to pull him, lure him into anything. Mike believes that. No matter how convoluted everything else is, no matter how many circular paths of thought he's trapped in, going around and around and around, *that* he knows for certain. It's a steady and solid fact, an anchor. Will would never do anything, never *suggest* anything that would harm Mike.

But would it hurt anyway? Does just doing this poison them both somehow? Society seems to think so. Being with another guy - being *anything* with another guy except for allies, good buddies, or adversaries - don't people say that does something to you? Makes you less of a man, somehow? Degrades you somehow?

Does Mike believe that?

Does he care?

---

*Thursday*

He sweeps dry leaves off the porch, mechanical, mind barely tethered to his body. The *swish* of the broom is a grating, regular beat.

What is there to lose, anyway? What the hell is he so caught up on?

The nuclear family, white picket fence future that he's never wanted anyway? No, thanks. He feels trapped just thinking about it.

Being a normal person? That ship rather sailed when he got caught up in preternatural forces and secret government agencies at age twelve.

His reputation? Maybe, but it's not stellar with classmates as it is, his friends have seen enough weird shit that *this* would probably barely register, and they're all leaving for college next year anyway. High school reputations end with high school, and they don't have much of that left.

A potential girlfriend? Not like he could never date anyone else after this... arrangement, if he - *when* he bows out.

But that's the thing, isn't it? Maybe he's not really afraid of losing all

that, the possibility of it. Maybe what he's actually afraid of is that he won't *want* any of that if he gets a taste of something else. And that's... it's... bad? He's supposed to think it's bad. Society would say it's bad. He can't tell if he actually agrees, or if that's just a track worn so deep in his mind by exposure and repetition that it's hard to think anything else.

And then a thought occurs to him. The broom stops.

Clearly Will is a queer - shit, Mike had always wondered a little, but he never knew for sure, not until now - and Will doesn't act like less of a man.

Or, well - *other* people would say he does.

When he was a kid, adults called him a *gentle soul*. As a young teen they called him a *late bloomer*. Now that they're nearly adults, Mike hears far less charitable whispers, sometimes. Will can be soft-spoken, even a bit of a pushover, especially in public or with people he doesn't know or isn't comfortable with. He's much more assertive and outspoken with friends. He's creative, observant, thoughtful and kind. He's not exactly what you'd call *macho*. And some people - Troy and his gang comes to mind, and Lonnie, and Mike scowls at the ground - look at that and see someone weak. Someone lacking something. Feminine, almost - no, effeminate. That would be the word.

But Mike has never seen that. He's never thought that. He never thought that Will was lacking anything or was any lesser for being how he is. Even now that he knows Will is queer, after all. He doesn't think Will is... *bad* in some way, lesser, just... different.

Hell, Mike likes that. He's always liked that Will wasn't like everybody else, that he was unapologetically his own person. He's always liked Will's observant, unpretentious nature and artistic instincts and his quiet bravery that becomes brilliantly visible during times of urgency or strife. It has never ceased to amaze Mike, how Will can step out of the background and take control of a situation, capable and intelligent under stress and pressure in a way that Mike envies.

So, some people would call Will less of a man for who he is. Some people also call pineapple a pizza topping. Those people are communists and should be shipped to a desert island to think about their life's choices.

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## *Saturday*

He paces. He stews. He tries to read and can't focus.

Okay. So, Will being queer isn't a negative thing. It's not detrimental.

The thing is, it's a whole 'nother arena, trying to apply that same logic to himself. Will is one thing. Mike can process and digest and accept the facts that Will is queer, and that's not bad, and he's no different from the Will Mike has always known. He can swallow that with relatively little trouble. But trying to turn it around and apply it to himself is an entirely different beast. Namely because Mike isn't queer. He likes girls. He's always liked girls. Will in a relationship with a guy is just Will being Will. Mike in a relationship with a guy is... different. It's different.

*Is it?* something whispers, deep down where he shoves unwanted thoughts and impulses. *Are you sure?*

Mike growls in frustration and kicks at the carpet. He's getting nowhere this way. It's been a whole week and his thoughts just keep going around in the same circles, dragged along in the same self-perpetuating patterns, doubts canceling each other out and redoubling themselves at once.

So maybe it's time to approach this from a different angle.

Speaking logically, Mike can hardly find fault with Will's so-called proposition. Having a virtually foolproof shield against AIDS is not something to be sneezed at. That's a big deal. Like. Really big. People would kill for that. And it would *work*. That's the thing. If neither of them have had the chance to catch it yet, and then if they only, you know, with each other, then... they'd be safe.

Complete protection from the horrifying and deadly disease that's

been wiping out huge chunks of the population. If that had been Will's whole offer, just *that*, Mike would still be seriously considering it. It's like magic. Too good to be true. Poof. Terrifying threat gone. And all he has to do is keep it in his pants except for...

He gets up again. Pacing restlessly from his bed to his desk and sitting down there, like the five feet made such a difference.

Except for Will.

*Kissing, if you want it. Sex, if you want it.*

Mike fidgets. He firmly *ignores* that his pants are just a little bit uncomfortable all at once.

What would that even look like? Will doesn't mean *all the way*, right? Like... up the ass, that kind of thing? People actually do that, right? It's not just a joke? He's pretty sure people actually do that. But how the hell would he know? Is that what Will meant? Or was he talking about other stuff? Less hardcore stuff? Maybe he just meant handjobs. Blowjobs. Grinding together. Quiet and desperate in a warm tangle of blankets, thrusting against each other's stomach or thigh. Kissing, maybe. Warm skin, human contact, fingers brushing the sweaty hair back from your eyes, a tongue dipping past your lips.

Unbidden, the memory of a dream: Will, completely unclothed, flushed from his ears to his thighs, perched in Mike's lap. Lips red and shiny with saliva, hazel eyes dark and fixed on Mike's as their hips rolled together.

Mike stands, so abruptly that his desk chair skids out behind him and bumps the wall. He holds his hands behind his head, breathing slow, deep breaths. There. If he's not sitting, his brain can't taunt him anymore with that phantom image. He can't have anybody in his lap if he's standing.

*Oh, yeah?* his brain mutters, and Mike puts his head down and bulldozes onwards. He needs to move forward. He will not get stuck on that thought, or he won't ever get unstuck.

If guaranteed safety from AIDS had been Will's entire offer, Mike still



may have considered it. And not because of the... the sex part.

But, that wasn't Will's whole offer. There was more. So much more.

What Will is offering... It opens doors. Doors that would be functionally closed and locked to Mike alone. There are freedoms that couples have, financially, that single people are hard-pressed to match alone. It could mean a comfortable or even pleasant college life versus one constantly strapped for cash. It could mean freedom from his parents' thumb; being able to choose a college and a city and a degree and a career without them making constant vague threats to pull their financial support. It could mean a more comfortable and hopeful transition into college, with someone already there to support you and be there for you, instead of the sudden shock of being in a strange city with no friends and no family and no idea what you're doing or how you're going to survive.

It could mean the ability to look at apartments a year or two into college, instead of being stuck in dorms. More specifically, it could mean the ability to look at getting their *own* apartment, not sharing with a lot of roommates. And that's nothing to sneeze at, either. It could mean a co-signer on student loans. It could mean that if one of them stumbles, loses a job or has to re-do a semester, they're not screwed. They have a - like Will said, a safety net. They'd have each other. Hell, if it really came down to it, they could work each *other* through college. Mike isn't totally sure what he wants to do yet. Maybe he could take some time off of school, get a job somewhere, take the brunt of the financial responsibility so Will could focus on his art degree. And then they could swap. It's a thought. He doesn't think it's what he really wants to do, but it's an *option*, that's the point. It's an option they'd have, together, that they wouldn't have alone.

Plus the career thing. Two incomes makes a *lot* possible. It gives you a lot of wiggle room. Options. Freedom. Mike has heard more than his fair share of his relatives gossiping and bitching about money in various households. He knows. Shit, they might even be able to pull off both working part time and still meeting expenses. They'd be a little tight, probably, but what a forbidden fruit *that* is. Making ends meet on a part-time job. Lots of free time. Time to write, maybe, if he still wants to be a writer by then. Time to learn an instrument or craft

beautifully complex campaigns. *Time*. Isn't that what everyone wants more than anything? People have died by the hundreds and thousands in the search for immortality. Employers pay for your time. It's everyone's greatest regret and biggest source of stress. Not having enough time. And Will -

*I know you've said you might want to be a writer. Or do something creative. And that's hard. It is not easy to get by on that kind of career. Unless there were two of us.*

Fuck. Does Will know? Does Will realize that he just offered Mike his hopes and dreams on a silver platter?

*Forbidden fruit*, that voice like his mother's whispers again, more worried this time because he's so much more tempted than he was a few days ago. *Deal with the devil*.

He bats it aside. He's busy. He's thinking.

He realizes, all at once, that he's started to imagine it. What it would be like. Years down the road, if they do this thing, if they're *still* doing this thing. He's imagining a nice apartment in one of those big cities Will talks about so passionately. Will's art on the walls. They have a dog, or maybe a cat - dogs are big pets for apartments. He's imagining shouldering through the door with groceries, his hair and jacket dusted with snow. Sitting down over pasta to discuss a project. It's... it's a graphic novel, Mike decides. He writes the story and Will draws. They're hoping to publish it. He doesn't work in an office, he's not closed in a cubicle all day, or in retail, dealing with bratty customers. All his worst fears and dreads about the future... they're not there.

They check the newspaper for movie times. There's one they've been wanting to see. Do they risk the snow? It's not that far of a walk.

Work is hard some days, and boring on others, but Mike has a legal pad on his person at all times and scribbles down ideas whenever he can get away with it. And it's only twenty or thirty hours. He has plenty of days when he doesn't need to go in, or when he's only working half the day. The rest of the time, he gets to spend his finite hours on Earth doing what he actually likes.

They'll be paying off student debt until they die, probably, but they're doing okay enough to replace the dishwasher when it kicks the bucket, and to visit Disney World every few years, and to get friends and family good Christmas gifts.

Maybe AIDS is still a crisis, maybe not, but either way they don't have to worry.

The city is ever-changing and full of surprises. It's not a small town. It's not suburbia, with its endless, homogenized corporate wasteland. There are places to go, things to do. New experiences. Not just the same four walls and the same streets and the same two restaurants and three stores to bash their heads against over and over.

They never have to live in Hawkins again.

There's not a picket fence in sight.

---

*Tuesday*

He taps his eraser on his paper. Next to him, Will is hard at work on an equation, his pencil moving and then halting, moving and halting. Mike is gonna fall behind if he doesn't figure out this concept, but he doesn't care.

Here's the problem: he doesn't know if he can compartmentalize the way Will is suggesting. He doesn't know if he'd be able to be Will's partner in all ways - *except* the real ones. It doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel fair. He thinks it would eat away at him. He doesn't think he'd be able to share their money and their plans and their resources, take Will's energy and his affection and his... his...

Mike shrinks into himself, flushed and wide-eyed at the memory of Will saying, *Sex, if you want it*, even at the fiftieth remembrance.

His *body*, take all of that, *do* all of that and then just... go home like nothing ever changed and like Mike don't have a significant other. He doesn't think he can be Will's partner without being his... well... boyfriend. He can't keep that kind of emotional distance. Not in that situation. He can't separate those things in his mind.

So, if he accepts this... He can't do it the way Will said they could. Where they do everything except the real stuff. Everything except real dates and kisses and love.

Mike can't be queer for Will, he can't love him the way another queer guy would be able to. But he can't make life plans together and emotionally support each other and be closer than friends ever would be and then just... stop there. If they're gonna do this, they need to do all of it. Well, maybe not -

*Only if you want it.*

- *all* of it, all of it.

But he can't draw lines in the sand and spend his days trying to tiptoe around them. He won't set them up to be dancing around a lot of self-imposed guidelines and rules. *We can plan college with each other but not hold hands. We can make out, but no dates. Remember, this isn't real. I'm just here to use you.* It makes him wince just thinking about it. What an awful existence. He won't tie himself to that, and he absolutely will not tie Will to it.

No. He's either all out... or all in.

Even if that's just for a week, or a month, or a day. Will said himself, there's no commitment here. No contracts. They're just trying something out, and it works as long as it works, and then they make a clean break when it's done.

And if they can come out of it with their friendship... Well, there's the kicker. Is it possible to come out of this as friends? Surely it would be. It has to be. Or else Mike can't do this.

But... if they *don't* do this, wouldn't they lose each other that much faster? They have no huge reason to keep each other in their lives as friends. At least, not when they'd be moving away to college and living their separate lives, paths diverging further and further. And, for reasons he can't quite pinpoint, the thought is making Mike's chest constrict. He does not want to drift away from Will. Will is a big part of his life. Not just his day-to-day existence, but something bigger, something deeper. They've been part of each other's lives

since they were five. Losing that would be... big.

So really, what's the difference? If they do this and it doesn't work out, it could drive a wedge between them. But isn't that wedge lurking, anyway? Just waiting for college, for adult life, for them to go longer and longer periods between calls and visits? And isn't that worse? It feels worse. It feels cold, heavy in the pit of Mike's stomach, sinking through him. At least if they try, and split, and it ends in a big, colorful bang, at least they would have *tried*.

*Tried what?* that same, infuriatingly quiet, gentle voice whispers.

*To stay together*, Mike answers himself, hot-cheeked and annoyed.

*Why?* the voice questions, prods, probes.

But, that answer is easy. *Because we're best friends. Because we're important to each other. Because we're...*

*Partners?* the voice suggests, smug.

Mike lifts his fist and slams his pencil down into his paper, hard, breaking the lead and tearing the paper, ripping through to the desk underneath. Overwhelmed and scared and full of adrenaline and a newfound... decision? Maybe not quite that. But, a sort of courage, maybe. A *maybe*. An *almost*- decision.

Maybe this is wrong. Maybe this is the worst decision he's ever made in his life. Maybe he doesn't care.

"Stuck?" Will says mildly, unperturbed by Mike's tiny outburst.

Mike rubs at the pencil mark on the desk, glancing around to see if anyone is giving him a weird look. Anger issues are beyond embarrassing to deal with at school. Everyone treats you like a toddler throwing a tantrum. Teachers and students alike.

"Yeah," Mike mutters.

*Real stuck. Very, very stuck.*

"Mike?"

Mike jerks from his thoughts, head twitching to face Will, and for a split-second he sees Will's casual façade flicker.

Mike was deep in thought - way deep - and Will knew exactly what he was thinking about. They both know. They could both tell, for that split second.

And then Will recovers, quick as a blink, and says, "Which question is it? I think I'm getting it, I can probably help out."

---

*Friday*

"This is... crazy." Will looks over, but Mike can't look back, not yet, so he just repeats, "You know this is crazy."

It's been almost two weeks since the conversation.

And in those two weeks, Mike has barely stopped thinking. His actual *brain* feels tired. He thinks he can feel his frontal lobe aching. He's been going in circles upon circles upon circles and now he's dizzy, and tired, and - well, not ready. He'll never be ready.

But he thinks he's as close as he'll ever be.

They're in the Wheeler basement, the weekend has officially started, and for a solid half hour, they barely said anything. Both deeply engaged in their own activities. Will was reading and Mike was pretending to study, but really just trying to build up courage. Gearing up to it.

And now, finally, he managed to speak.

Will slips a bookmark into his book and tosses it onto the coffee table. Casual. Too casual. He clasps his hands and they begin to bounce between his knees. When it becomes clear that Mike isn't going to say anything else, Will speaks in a low, almost teasing voice. "We generally do that together, yeah?"

And, oh, god, this is the same couch, isn't it? It's the same damn couch as *that* conversation, years ago on Halloween, candy spilled out on the table in front of them. No Mike's Pile and Will's Pile, just one

big mess, up for grabs. Pooling resources.

And maybe that's what pushes Mike to finally take the plunge -

*I don't know. Sometimes I feel like I'm going crazy.*

*Me, too.*

*Hey, well, if we're both going crazy, then we'll go crazy together, right?*

*Yeah. Crazy together.*

- like maybe this is something they've been hurtling towards for a while. A long while.

Trick-or-treat candy spread out on the coffee table. No *my pile* and *your pile*, just *our pile*. Shared resources. Two mugs of steaming tea on a scarred kitchen table. A proposition.

*Together, right?*

*We could wait out the storm together. We could take care of each other.*

Mike drags two hands down over his face, like he's wiping away something, and blows out a breath, and says, "Okay. Okay, but I'm not doing this half-and-half. I can't do that. I'm... I'm not the kind of person that can compartmentalize and balance like that. Maybe I'm just immature, I don't know. But I've always been that way. Especially about..." He sucks in a breath. "This kind of stuff. I'm all or nothing. It's just... I can't help it, it's how I'm wired."

He takes a peek, and the corner of Will's mouth quirks up in a dry little smile, like he's saying, *Oh, trust me, Mikey, I know. I've known you since you were the most stubborn five year old alive.*

"So. If we're gonna do this." Mike is trembling. He's terrified, he realizes, distantly. Terrified and expectant, in a terrible, fantastic, stomach-shredding way. "We have to *really* do this. I can't be your partner without..."

He feels a sharp prickle behind his nose. His jaw is clenching, he's freezing up. He's not allowed to say this. This is mortifying, it's *weak*,

it makes him vulnerable, people don't say this kind of stuff, it's too dangerous -

And he has to. He has to communicate this. Or else none of this will work.

And he wants this to work.

He really wants this to work.

"Without. Loving you. And I don't know," he rushes on, relieved to be past those words, "I don't know if I *can*, the way you..."

"I'm not asking you to," Will cuts in, gentle, urgent, but Mike shakes his head.

"I - I - I don't -"

Fuck. This is awful, he's getting emotional all over again. It's *embarrassing*, and he hates that he can't just calm the hell down and say this. He wants to bail. This is too much. Too hard. Too vulnerable, too dangerous.

*Just try*, he urges himself. *You have to try*.

He takes a deep breath to calm the jump of his diaphragm, and tries again.

"I don't know if I can be in love with you," *and maybe that's not fair to him*, he thinks, *But Will did say this is just temporary, just to try it out, just for now. No long term commitments made.* "But." He has to look at their feet. It gets stuck in his chest, and he has to focus hard to get it out. It's the truth, but such a hard truth. Razor-edged. It slices his throat on the way up, leaving his voice rough and wet, cutting his tongue. "I do love you. Like you said. And if we're gonna do this, I can't stand the... I can't stand drawing a bunch of lines in the sand. You know. Like, *we can share money but no kissing*, it just... I can't do that. I can't be tiptoeing around a minefield we planted for no good reason. If I'm gonna be with you I'm gonna *be* with you."

Will just breathes. Quietly, steadily. Mike wonders if this is another act he's perfected. Or maybe he's just processing, not quite sure what



Mike meant yet. He stayed quiet for Mike's speech, let him stumble his way through that awful, painful, *difficult*, hopeful spiel. He hopes it was enough. He hopes he actually communicated what he wanted to say. It's hard to tell, when all he can hear is the blood rushing in his ears.

Finally, Will takes a little breath. "So, if I'm understanding you correctly," he begins, all careful professionalism, and Mike can't deal with that, he can't wait long enough for Will to finish that sentence.

"Yes," he says. "Yes, I want - what you were saying. To *try*. I want to try. I don't know if - but - I want to try."

His blood pounds in his ears for another few beats, and then Will says, "Can you look at me?"

Mike's shoulders go rigid. Will wants him to *look* at him right now? He can barely talk. "Why?"

"I just - I dunno, I wanna see that this is actually happening."

But Mike can't. He can't, he can't, he -

"You're shaking," Will says, softly, and Mike just nods, because, yeah, he is. There's the sound of Will swallowing. "Hey. Mike. I'm not gonna hurt you."

"I know," Mike breathes, eyes still fixed on the coffee table in front of them.

Will moves. Just the tiniest bit, just an inch closer on the couch. "What's wrong?"

Mike's eyes close. He hates himself for this. For how badly he's handling this conversation. He thought he'd be stronger than this. He made his decision. He already thought it through, ten times over and inside out and sideways. He had time to process, time to have his emotions behind closed doors, and here they are again to muck everything up.

But, fuck it. He's already being weak and weepy enough, may as well add this one drop to the bucket. May as well let Will know what he's

getting into.

“I’m scared.”

“Of me?” Will says, sounding very small and sad in that moment, and Mike gives his head a hard little shake.

“Of *me*.”

Will very carefully reaches out and puts one hand on Mike’s knee - already a more intimate, suggestive motion than they’d usually allow. “You know, you don’t have to do this.”

And that, of all things, *that* gives Mike the courage to turn his head and look up, looking into Will’s face. “I want to.”

Will is hesitant. Disbelieving. Skeptical. “Are you sure?”

He nods. Maintaining eye contact takes all the effort and willpower of lifting a car, but he does it, because Will wants to see the truth of it in his eyes. And maybe he finds it there, because his expression is starting to change. Eyes beginning to light up with a wary happiness, the frown smoothing from his brow, lips almost quirking up.

“Really?” Will says.

Another nod, stronger this time.

“Really?”

“Yes,” Mike laughs, tension finally breaking. It’s a familiar, annoyed laugh. And, there, that’s easier. That feels better. Not such an uphill battle, not dragging so many demons behind him. “I said yes.”

“Oh,” Will says.

“So.” He sniffs, sits up a little straighter. Okay. He’s okay. He made it through. It was... hard, but he’s here. He’s out the other side. “What now?”

Will opens his mouth, then closes it. “I, uh. I didn’t really expect to make it this far.”

Mike nods, rubbing his lips together, considering. All right. Time for Phase 2 of the plan, then. He's got to test this thing out. See if it holds water. And he has the momentum now. He should say it now, do it now, before he loses that.

"Well, then." He has to swallow down a scratch in his throat, looking away because he's no longer brave enough to meet Will's eyes. "I was thinking I should maybe kiss you. You know, to test it out."

"Oh." The word is entirely blank, and then Will seems to catch up to the meaning and he repeats, "*Oh*. Uh, shit. Yeah."

Mike sees motion out of the corner of his eye, and when he glances up again Will is fluttering his hands like he's holding invisible tambourines. It tugs at something in Mike's chest. Will hasn't done that particular nervous tic since he was *seven*. He seems to realize what he's doing when Mike looks, and he interlaces his fingers and traps his hands between his knees to stop the motion.

"I, uh." Will gives an anxious burst of laughter. "I feel like I'm walking into a test I didn't get to study for."

"It's not supposed to be -"

"Just - don't judge all of this based off of -"

"It's not a test, it just -"

"I feel like I'm gonna fuck up," Will says with a chuckle, smiling uncertainly at Mike from the other couch cushion.

Mike smiles back. A genuine, unintentional, spontaneous smile. He recognizes that sentiment. That fear, that nervousness. Wasn't he just feeling it himself, a minute ago? Except, all at once, he's not quite so paralyzed anymore. He's still scared. Shitting bricks scared. But Will is nervous, too, afraid he's gonna fuck up a kiss, and somehow that grounds Mike more than anything else. It reminds him that they're both just human. This isn't *such* a huge thing. Sure, it's huge. It's monumental. But they're both just flesh and blood, and he's nervous, and Will is nervous, and maybe that's okay. Maybe they'll figure it out anyway.

“Well if you fuck up too badly we’ll just restart,” Mike says, and that makes Will laugh.

And then it’s time to lean in, before he loses momentum and loses his nerve. He has to do it now.

Now.

Mike lifts a regrettably sweaty hand, using the non-sweaty backs of his fingers to touch Will’s cheek and turn his face. Will’s eyes go wide, and he stops moving altogether - deer in the headlights - which means this is now a Mike responsibility. All right. He’s okay with that. This is something he can do.

Probably.

If Will would stop staring at him like that.

Mike wets his lower lip, and, *christ*, Will’s eyes just darted down to watch the motion. “Um, could you close your eyes please?”

Will closes his eyes.

Mike takes one more full breath, scans over Will’s face, and leans in.

### Notes for the Chapter:

I know this was, like, 90% just Mike thinking and 10% plot, but to be fair Mike has internalized homophobia and heteronormativity out the ears. He needed some processing time and a couple paradigm shifts before he even agreed to try this. (And trust me, the internalized homophobia is not beaten yet by any stretch of the imagination.)

Please do let me know what you think! I'll say it again, this fic grabbed me by the throat. I'm not even entirely sure where it's going or what it wants from me. I guess we'll find out together ∆( ◁ )▷

### 3. Walls

October 1988

Mike starts to lean in. Will starts to panic.

He wasn't expecting this. He wasn't ready. And it's not that he doesn't want this, he does, very much so, but Mike said it like this was a *test*, and what if Will can't -?

Mike pauses, barely three inches from Will's face, and Will thinks he might die then and there when the pink tip of a tongue darts out to wet Mike's lips. "Um," Mike says, low and halting, "Could you close your eyes please?"

Oh. Right. You're supposed to do that. You're supposed to close your eyes when you kiss.

Jesus christ, are they really about to *kiss*? Is this really about to happen? Is he really about to touch lips with Mike, or is this some particularly cruel joke of the universe? Is Mike about to get ninety percent of the way there and then snort with laughter, jerking back to crow, *You really believed that? You really thought I was gonna kiss you?*

*No*, Will tells his doubts and anxieties, *Mike said he wanted this. He said he wanted to try the plan. Our plan. He said -*

Will is tense. He doesn't *mean* to be, but his body is going rigid against his will, stomach stitched up close to his ribs and jaw wired tight.

He senses Mike pulling away - soft breath and the nearly imperceptible presence of body heat disappearing - and he wants to cry out and pull him back. *Wait*, he thinks as his eyes flash open, *No, no, no, wait, I'm sorry, just let me try -*

But Mike is still hovering, expression soft, close enough for Will to make out every freckle and imperfection. "Relax," he murmurs, and Will lets out a breath he'd been holding captive in his belly.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm sorry."

Mike's look of empathy deepens into concern, and that's so much worse. "Hey," he half-whispers, "It's okay. Don't be sorry."

"Sorry," Will repeats, automatically, uselessly, like a stupid fucking stuck record. *Sorry. Sorry for being sorry. Sorry for being sorry for being sorry.* "I'm sorry, I just - I don't really know how -"

Mike is listening with a little frown, still hovering so close that Will can smell him, the soap he uses, the smell of classrooms still hanging around his sweater, and all Will can think is, *Shit. Shit, shit, shit, I'm ruining this already. I swear I can be better than this, Mike, please believe me, I just, I wasn't expecting this so soon.*

"You're doing great," Mike says, and Will scoffs, because, no, he's not, he's doing awful.

What a fantastic way to start this off. Way to go, Byers. And isn't that embarrassing? *Well, you see, I'm useless at this because I've never kissed anyone before, except for that poor girl in freshman year, and that doesn't count because it wasn't real.*

He forces his shoulders down and pries his tongue off the roof of his mouth. Relax. *Relax.* He can do this. How is Mike ever going to see him as a viable partner if he can't even manage a kiss?

Mike takes a half-breath, throat catching in the middle, and looks down. His lashes form a split-second pattern against the pale skin of his cheek - Will is close enough to make out the details. Their knees are pressed together, he realizes. Mike must have scooted closer when he moved in, turning a little on the couch cushion to face Will. Shouldn't they be more face-to-face? Won't this angle be awkward? But then they'd have to stand up or -

Or Will would have to climb directly into Mike's lap.

A shiver crawls up his back, distracting him from the beginning of Mike's sentence.

"How 'bout I... I could just... show you."

“Show me?” Will echoes, half a second before his brain catches up.

Oh.

Oh.

*I'm sorry, I just - I don't really know how -*

Show him.

Like, show him how to kiss.

Oh, fuck.

Oh, yes.

He doesn't know whether to be relieved or to screech in terror. After a shell-shocked moment, relief wins out. Of course. Of course Mike would find a way to fix this. Of course Mike would know what to say, how to make it better. God, Will loves him.

“Oh,” Will blurts, managing to get *something* out before Mike feels like he has to re-explain. “Yeah. Good, sure. That - that works.”

It's such an understatement, so much more impartial than what he's really thinking, but he won't come on too strong and push Mike away. Not now.

*Show me what you like*, he begs silently, closing his eyes again with a buzz of panicky anticipation in his throat as Mike leans in once again. *Teach me how you like to be kissed.*

But still, Mike doesn't make contact. Will is just starting to wonder if he's being teased, or tricked, when a thumb drags against the hinge of his jaw just under his earlobe.

“Relax your jaw,” Mike says.

Will does. Unclenching the muscles, putting space between his molars, getting his tongue back down from the roof of his mouth again.

“And...” Something touches Will’s lips and he gives a minuscule jump, but it’s just Mike’s thumb again, brushing against Will’s dry and chapped lower lip. “Let your lips part a little.”

Will does, feeling a little vulnerable now, though he doesn’t know why.

He’s anticipating the touch, this time, and he doesn’t jump when Mike’s hands touch either side of his head and push, gently. “Tilt your head. Or we’re gonna smash our noses together.”

He *almost* laughs, startled by the silly imagery, but he manages to hold it in.

He can’t help it; he opens his eyes. This is taking so long, and he wants to see what’s going on. *Just kiss me*, he thinks, eager and impatient and second-guessing himself. *Just come and kiss me already*.

Maybe Mike is nervous, too. Or maybe he just doesn’t want to. Maybe he’s putting it off as long as he can because this is a chore to him.

But before that thought can get too far, Mike’s hands have moved again, this time taking Will’s wrists, tugging Will’s hands up.

Mike’s voice is a little unsteady, this time. Maybe it has something to do with Will’s open eyes, how he’s watching Mike quietly, wordlessly. “You can put your hands on my shoulders if you want.”

Will does. Shyly, completing the action that Mike set in motion, wrapping cold fingers around the warm solidness of Mike’s shoulders, feeling the thick-soft texture of his sweater. But as soon as he gets there Mike is pulling at his wrists again, moving them, and Will barely has time to think, *Did I do something wrong?* before Mike is pressing Will’s palms to his waist, just above Mike’s bony hips.

“Or... here.”

Moving again, and this time Will can feel Mike’s fingers shaking as he guides Will’s hands to Mike’s own head and neck.

And finally the fingers around Will’s wrists slip away, letting his hands *stay*, and Mike whispers, “Or here.”



Will swallows. *Relax your jaw. Part your lips. Tilt your head.* And then, as they *both* start to move in this time - *Close your eyes.*

And they're kissing. It happens before Will even realizes. He tunes back in after a moment of absent shock and thinks, hazily, *Oh, it's happening already.* And then the shock wears away and he breathes out a long, slow breath against Mike's cheek, his whole body seeming to unravel, shoulders falling and neck going loose as he thinks, *Oh, finally.*

Mike's hands have found their way to Will's torso. One on his hip and one on his shoulder, steadying him, grounding him as a warm pair of lips work carefully against his own. And Will doesn't know how to do that, he doesn't know how to move his mouth the right way - is he supposed to pucker, or what? - but he leans in, relaxes into the touch, just accepting.

There's a warmth, an ache, bleeding through the hollow center of his chest and out towards his extremities. Glowing and steady and inexorable, it burns like a hot little flame in the cage of his ribs and creeps up his throat, down his arms, into his stomach and his spine and the throbbing tips of his fingers. Every nerve in his body is awake, buzzing like a livewire, and *especially* those sensitive nerve endings in his lips. He didn't know lips could feel this much. Is that weird? Surely it's abnormal, how sensitized his lower face has become. His whole jaw feels like it's just shy of tingling. He has a sudden, startling desire, nearly feral in its intensity, for Mike to suck on his lower lip.

When Mike slips away, their lips parting with a tiny, wet noise, Will's hands and arms flex on instinct. Gripping the side of Mike's head and the back of his neck, thoughtlessly trying to keep him from leaving. *No, wait. Please. Come back. That was so fast.*

"All there is to it," Mike rasps, and then his head ducks to clear his throat, and Will tries to fight away disappointment that it's over.

"Well, that's not so hard," he tries to joke.

But Mike isn't pulling away, extracting himself from Will's soft grip on his head, and Will tries not to notice his own heart beating a little

harder with hope. Maybe Mike wants to do it again?

It's too much to wish for. *Don't be greedy*, he tells himself, *You got your impossible wish, and you want more? Don't question magic like that. Just be glad you got what you got.*

"There's other kinds," Mike says abruptly, and all at once Will realizes that *his* hands haven't moved either, they're still burning holes in Will's hip and shoulder. "Of kisses."

Will falls through the floor in one long, tumbling swoop. "Yeah?"

He can see Mike's throat move as he swallows. "You can use your tongue, too."

Will has to ask. He knows that, suddenly, looking at Mike's wide-eyed, furtive, eager terror. Mike won't take this step. If Will wants it -

And, oh, how he wants it.

His voice is hoarse as a rusty hinge as he forces himself to say, "Could you show me that?"

Mike's frame deflates a little with the permission - is Will just projecting, or is Mike really mirroring his own relief? But he's already shifting, tilting forward, finally submitting to the gentle tug of Will's palms on his skull.

"Okay."

Will is so content just to have their mouths pressed together again, despite his lingering insecurities of inexperience and clumsiness, that for a second he forgets why they're doing this again. He just goes pleasantly blank, easing back into it, soaking in the texture of Mike's hair under his fingers and the hot, flesh-and-blood beat of Mike's pulse, and the smell of him. The primal-reassuring touch of lips to lips, slotting together as Mike relaxes and parts his own lips a little further.

And then something hot and soft and slick brushes against Will's upper lip and a little electric shock snaps through him, raising the hair on the back of his neck. Right. Right, the tongue thing. That's

why they're doing this.

A second later Will feels it again, and this time, Mike's tongue slips along the soft inner lining of Will's top lip, nearly grazing his teeth - and Will is just as surprised as Mike to feel his mouth opening. It's a buried instinct, long dormant. An urge Will has never felt until his body gave in to it without thought or question, opening up under Mike's tongue.

For a split second Will worries that he made the wrong move, like maybe that's too weird, and then Mike is already moving into the offered space. Tracing around the shape of Will's lips and then slipping his tongue further into Will's mouth, Mike's own jaw going lax as he opens his mouth in kind.

Will is a mess. There's not a complete thought in his brain, it's all just happy, breathless static. Will's hands are in Mike's hair and Mike's tongue is stroking along Will's lower lip and he'll never be sad again.

Mike is keeping remarkably cool, all things considered. He seems confident and almost... unaffected, in a way. Closed off, maybe. And Will supposes that's fair enough, Mike isn't wired to enjoy this quite the way Will is.

But, as Mike breaks away half an inch to breathe, huffing against Will's lips, chest rising and falling, Will presses his forehead hard against Mike's and thinks, *I'll learn how to make this good for you, too. I'll learn what you like. I'll learn how to unravel you. I promise.*

And then Mike fits their mouths together again like it's the most natural thing in the world, leaning into Will with a deep inhale, and Will notices something. He feels how Mike's hand is slipping, inch by inch, around Will's hip and to the small of his back. How the hand on Will's shoulder has started to bunch up the fabric of his shirt. How Mike's movements are careful, measured. Not hesitant, not ginger, just... gentle. Deliberate. Like he's feeling his way forward, meditating on every movement and sensation. Like maybe he's... savoring them? It seems like too much to hope for. But Mike is being very purposeful about this. Studious. Alert. Like he's taking great care to control his actions, keep himself in check.

That deliberate care slips, for the first time, when their tongues touch.

The brush of tongue against tongue makes something *tug* deep in Will's belly, and he hears a sound of animal satisfaction hum in his mouth before realizing he made it. A hungry, contented little *mmph*. He cringes as soon as he realizes he did it - how embarrassing - but Mike seems to *respond* to that. Really respond, for the first time, rather than just leading and guiding. He shivers and presses in with a jagged motion that seems half instinctual, his tongue rubbing against Will's in a way that makes Will pant through his nose.

Yes, Will thinks, half delirious, *Good. That's good, Mike, that's okay. Let me in. It's just me.*

But after that Mike seems to close up again, clamming up more tightly than before, throwing himself back into making *Will* respond, and, well, Will doesn't have the strength of mind to do anything but oblige.

He doesn't remember when they started full-on frenching. He just knows that five minutes ago he'd never been kissed, and now his mouth is yawning against Mike's, lips a little slick with saliva, and their tongues are doing what Will can only describe as *exploring*. Sliding together, feeling out each other's lips and teeth, seeing what it feels like when they push or flick.

*Oh, my god*, Will thinks, remembering all at once why they're here and how this is even happening. *He said yes.*

This is his partner. He's not just getting kissed - and, god *damn* is he getting kissed - he's kissing his *partner*. Mike agreed. He agreed to the deal. He said yes. They're partners.

A surge of fierce affection wells up in him, giving him no choice but to nuzzle against his *partner*, nipping at Mike's lip with mischievous enthusiasm, heart beating madly.

*My partner. My person. My Mike.*

Mike gasps at the nip, breaking away - not to chide, as Will expected,

but to drag damp kisses down the length of Will's throat. Will barely has time to think, *What is he doing?* before Mike's mouth seals around the flesh right between his neck and shoulder, biting down before giving a hard suck. Will goes limp and groans, head lolling, no longer even attempting to keep track of what's happening. He doesn't care. Just as long as Mike doesn't stop.

And then - Murphy's Law - Mike stops.

Will understands why a moment later, when Mike is already on the other side of the couch with a binder in his lap, pretending to study as footsteps cross the floor above.

The basement door opens.

"Will!" Karen hollers. "Your mom's here!"

*Fuckshit.*

The shopping.

They were going early Christmas shopping in the city today, where the big department stores have clearance sales. They always go during October, before Christmas prices can even *begin* to creep up, when there's plenty of time to start collecting gifts on a tight budget. Will has been so single mindedly focused, since the moment Mike spoke up, that he entirely forgot what day it was and what he was waiting for.

"Okay!" he manages to call back.

Mike is staring when Will turns around, but his eyes drop before they can make real eye contact. "I guess I have to," Will says, gesturing vaguely up the stairs.

"Christmas shopping, right?"

"Yeah. God, I completely forgot." He stands regretfully, shoving things into his backpack with jelly fingers.

Karen's footsteps retreat again, Distantly, Will can make out the muffled tones of their mothers chatting at the Wheelers' front door.

The couch squeaks as Mike gets up, and Will is about to laugh - his *hair*, it's a complete mess thanks to Will's fingers - when Mike darts in for one last little peck. Will immediately forgets what he was going to say, blushing and grinning, convinced he fell into a different dimension again. A good one, this time.

Mike suddenly pulls an *oh no* face, grimacing and whispering, "Shit, your hair!"

They both move to pat it down, hands colliding and getting in each other's way, and Will is tugging his shirt straight, smoothing out wrinkles when Mike's eyes land on something on his neck. His eyes widen and he looks away, avoiding Will's gaze as he says, "I'll - see you later, I guess."

"See you," Will says, and he stumbles up the stairs, starry-eyed and half-hard in his pants and grinning like a fool, and completely incapable of feeling any deserved shame about it.

He can't even feel bad about the awkward goodbye and the way Mike couldn't quite meet his eyes. He's still grinning as he greets his mom, still grinning as they drive away, trying to hide it in a sleeve. He's more chipper and agreeable than he has been on a shopping trip... ever.

"You're in a good mood," Joyce comments, about five minutes into the drive.

Will laughs aloud. *Well, that would be on account of I got kissed real good.*

But what he says is, "I think I'm having a fever dream," and, *whoops*, that was the wrong thing to say to his mom.

She turns to look at him, worried now. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he assures quickly. "Yeah. Totally."

This might work. This might actually *work*.

That was more than Will ever imagined, more than he ever hoped for. Mike was... he wasn't just putting up with it, or using Will as a

warm body. He was *present*. He participated, he reacted, they worked together. They did that *together*. This might *work*.

And, hell, even if it doesn't Will doesn't care. Not right now. Not with the taste of Mike still on his lips, in his mouth, the imprint of Mike's hand pressing into his right hip just above his belt. He's riding too high, too far gone to care if that never happens again, because it *happened*, and Mike is his *partner*, they agreed and they're doing this. And whether it lasts for a day or a decade, Will couldn't be in a bad mood right now if he was punched in the gut and robbed. For right now, everything is perfect.

---

Well. It works.

Mike sits in the basement, alone, trying not to notice how he can still smell Will on his clothes. He feels like he just went cliff diving. Adrenaline is rushing through him. His heart rate still hasn't settled.

He kissed Will to see if it would work at all, if he could stomach it. Would it be repulsive to him? Mildly distasteful? Would he barely feel anything at all, and just go through the motions? Or... would he like it?

He liked it.

He liked it enough to get entirely carried away, stroking his tongue into Will's hot, slick mouth, hands creeping up Will's ribs, even breaking away to pepper kisses down Will's throat and bite gently at his neck - and where the hell had *that* impulse come from? He never did that with El. Hell, he never did *half* of that with El, and he's only kissed one other girl - a brief and stomach-fluttering encounter on a field trip, in a removed hallway of the science and nature museum when they both managed to duck the tour guide and teacher chaperones. But Mike has never done *that* before. Marcy Elliot let him trace his tongue along the soft edges of her glossed lips, hiding from chaperones between a butterfly display and a rock wall demonstrating mineral dating, but he's never touched tongues with anyone before. Not like *that*.

Okay, he thinks, heart still pounding, palms still a little damp, just a

*touch* of shameful arousal still simmering in his blood. *Okay, yeah. So. It works. It works with Will.*

But does it work a little *too* well? Was that a failing on Mike's part? Did he forget himself too much? Maybe he shouldn't have been that drawn in. Maybe he shouldn't have enjoyed it so much.

But he was in control. He was *in control*. It's not like Will had *seduced* him or anything. Mike was behind the wheel, that whole time. He was the one giving instructions, guiding and controlling what they did. He was leading, not being led. He was careful not to let it affect him too much.

Yeah, he *enjoyed* it, but he didn't let it *get* to him. He carefully kept his walls up, isolating and quashing any reflexive sighs, shivers or groans. He blocked it out from his innermost self, enjoying the contact without letting it *get* to him. And a warm body is a warm body, after all. It's not like *that* makes him gay. So, thus far, no harm no foul.

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## *November*

Mike is in a bizarre kind of limbo for the next couple weeks. He eats dinner with his family. He does his homework, or he doesn't. He tells bedtime stories to his demanding but endearing little sister. He goes to school and talks to classmates and hangs out with the Party. And every few days or so he finds himself in a private corner somewhere, in his basement or his room or Will's room or the AV room, locking lips with another guy.

It's the first big difference. There are other ones, smaller ones, but they might almost fly under the radar if Mike wasn't looking for them. Just little touches and gestures that might have gone completely unnoticed if not for the *situation*.

Will leans against Mike during Party Movie Night - just a *little* more cuddly than usual.

When Spock leans against the glass and rasps, "I have been, and always shall be, your friend," Will presses his lips together, eyes



misting.

This scene has always made Will cry, ever since they *begged* Mike's parents to take them to see it in theaters when they were eleven and it was way too scary for them. But they took advantage of Ted's general cluelessness, and he gave in and bought them tickets, and got an exasperated talking-to from his wife when Mike had nightmares about giant earwigs for weeks afterwards.

Now, Will hunkers down a little further on the couch, squashing Mike against the cushions. And Mike hesitates, debates, decides it's too dark for the Party to notice much - and gently lifts his arms in invitation. Will burrows right into the proffered embrace.

Halloween passes without great incident. Mike takes Holly trick-or-treating. She harassed him until he agreed to be Captain Hook while she was a crocodile. They stop by the Byers house last, taking the car. The Byers don't get many trick-or-treaters, on the edge of town as they are, but Joyce opens the door in a witch costume anyway and unloads at least half a pound of candy into Holly's plastic pumpkin. Will, dressed as someone who isn't very fond of Halloween anymore, smirks at Mike's costume in a way that makes his skin prickle - not at all unpleasantly.

A few days later, Will shows up to Mike's first period before the bell rings and presses a thermos into Mike's hands. He doesn't even say anything, just hands it over and leaves. It's full of coffee, sweet like Mike likes it, clearly brewed in the Byers' pot before Will left the house.

Will has also been bashfully gifting him with drawings and candy. And leaning against Mike when they stand together, and resting his chin on Mike's shoulder, and a couple times he even looks Mike right in the eyes and tells him he looks handsome that day. And Mike has to pull his sweater up over his head like a turtle and hide.

In all truth he's been raining attention on Mike, and Mike - ever the middle child, happy in the spotlight - doesn't quite know what to do with himself. He's overwhelmed and pleased and doesn't really know how to respond.

And he's worried. Is this what they're supposed to do? Is this what he's *expected* to do? He supposes he did promise Will a full relationship, not half-and-half. No matter how haunted he is by those earthworms in his belly, cold and slimy and wriggling, warning him with every not-quite platonic touch and sweet gesture that this is wrong, this is bad, he needs to get away from this.

Mike ignores that as best he can, and he does his best to stand up to the challenge. He offers to quiz Will for a test he's been worried about. He leaves funny or encouraging notes in Will's locker. He offers an embrace where before he might have given a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. And when Will offers Mike a place on his bed at a sleepover - *C'mon, the floor can't be comfortable. We don't have to cuddle or anything, just get up here.* - Mike climbs up. They wake with their backs pressed together and their feet touching.

Little differences. Small ones.

The thing is, it's so close to normal. It's *so* close to the things they normally do. Leaning against each other, listening to each other. Accepting each other's various little insanities without judgement. Mike's arm around Will's shoulders, Will's arm around Mike's waist. It's all so familiar, all so... normal. It's just that *little* bit extra that makes it strange or noteworthy. That *little* extra push.

*We make a good team, don't we?* Will's voice says in Mike's head, echoing more often than he'd like to admit.

And, yeah. They do.

Sometimes Mike forgets he's even in this arrangement, during moments at home or at school, or with other friends. Sometimes he can ignore it, forget it, forget that little uncomfortable voice in the back of his mind that whispers, *You're doing something bad. You're in trouble.* He even forgets with Will, sometimes, when they're just hanging around like they always do. And then Will licks his lips, or says something about college.

And then he'll remember.

And then there's the kissing.

And that's... becoming a problem.

Mike is slipping. He can feel it, he can tell. Every time he kisses Will - and, hell, all the other new stuff, too - he can feel himself sliding further. No matter how hard he tries to stay unaffected, separate, in control. So he fights harder, draws further into his shell, trying to keep himself from... He doesn't know. From feeling? From falling? From being moved?

From being *changed*, he thinks.

Mike turns over yet again, lifting his head to peer at the clock with bleary eyes. 3:12am. Fantastic. He flips onto his stomach and faceplants in his pillow, letting out a frustrated groan.

The real problem is, he's starting to think he's blocking them. Preventing them from something, from moving forward, hurting this thing he and Will are trying to build. Neither of them have said anything. Either Will is unaware of the war raging in Mike's mind, or simply unwilling to bring it up and disturb the peace. And Mike, well, frankly he's been avoiding the subject. Like if they just don't acknowledge that anything is different, maybe it'll be fine.

But he knows this isn't what Will meant when he offered this relationship.

The little stuff, it's nice. And the kissing is too nice, dangerously so. But they've been stuck. Stuck in a limbo, pretending like this thing isn't happening even while it happens, never looking directly at it. And that's Mike's fault. Because he's holding himself back. He's trying to let this thing happen while slamming on the brakes, and... he's realizing, now, that it just can't work like that.

And, finally, he's reached some sort of breaking point. Here, now, delirious from sleep deprivation and exhausted from trying to remain in control. Now, as he breathes into his pillow with a throbbing headache and swollen, itching eyelids, something snaps.

*Fine*, he thinks quietly, broadcasting the thought out into the universe. *Fine, I get it. I can't have both.*

He can't have control *and* this. He can't stay unaffected, unchanged, while he has this with Will. Either it's going to affect him, change him, or it's going to stop.

And he doesn't want it to stop.

He's ashamed to think it, but it's true. Maybe it's weakness, wanting to keep this thing. Maybe it's the easy path. Maybe he really is that easily bought: with attention and little gifts and kisses.

But, weakness or not, easy path or not, he can't bring himself to end this. The thought of it makes him recoil in - sadness, he realizes. The thought of breaking this off, giving it up, makes him sad. Acutely, unbearably so.

So...

He shifts again, turning his face to the cool, fresh air. Lost in deep, honest, sleep-deprived thought as one only can be at three in the morning.

So Mike is going to have to do something terrifying.

And he's not sure if he can.

---

Coins rattle and clink out onto the Byers' kitchen table, followed by the papery rustle of bills.

Mike swipes his hand into the fat pickle jar, dislodging the last stubborn bills. One rogue quarter rolls off the table and goes wobbling merrily away, and Will stoops to catch it.

"I haven't counted in a while," Mike is saying, putting down the jar and starting to push the little pile of money into categories. Bills, quarters, other coins. "Last time I think I had about \$150." He smiles ruefully up at Will, who deposits the runaway quarter in its pile. "Advantages of having well-to-do relatives. I usually get money for Christmas and birthdays. From my aunts and uncles, at least. On my dad's side. And my grandparents do it too, but -"

"You really don't have to," Will interrupts. He's rocking from foot to

foot, looking a little guilty.

Mike shrugs. "I've barely touched it anyway."

He grimaces at himself as soon as he says it. It makes him sound like such an insufferable rich kid, standing in the Byers' run-down kitchen in their one-story house at the ragged edge of town, leaning over a pile of money and saying, *Oh, my savings? I barely use them. Honestly, I'll hardly notice splitting them.*

Mike starts counting, resolutely. Bills first. After a moment, Will drifts to the table and starts working on the coins.

It was a bit of a gamble, offering to give Will money.

*Share.* To *share* his money with Will. *Giving* makes it sound like charity, which the Byers have historically turned up their noses at. Will is no different than his mom or brother in this regard. Mike had to be very careful about how he phrased the idea, when he first proposed it. But it seemed right. It felt right. And not just in the spirit of this arrangement; Mike probably would have tried to split his money with Will anyway, if it had occurred to him and if he could convince Will to take it.

But maybe Will wouldn't have taken it, if they weren't doing this.

They count silently for a while, which is a welcome respite. Mike can't think too much while he's counting out the money. If he gets too far down one rabbit hole or another, he'll lose track. Plus, counting out bills like this makes him feel like a mobster in an old noir film.

Mike finishes counting a pile, notes the amount, and then gathers it up and flips through it with a thumb, lifting an invisible cigar to his mouth. "I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse," he slurs, in his best-worst impression of Marlon Brando, and Will snorts at him.

"You come into *my* house," Will says without looking up. "On this, the day of my daughter's wedding."

"Badda-bing, badda boom!"

Will arches an eyebrow at him and Mike shrugs.

"I dunno, somebody says that, right? I've never actually seen the whole movie."

Will's mouth drops open. "You've *never* -? Oh, we can't be friends anymore."

"What?" Mike laughs, while in the back of his mind something whispers, *Are we? Are we friends anymore?*

"It's a *classic*," Will insists over Mike's protests. "It's Scorsese!"

"It's *boring*. I remember seeing part of it on TV at my aunt's house when - wait a minute, it is not Scorsese."

"How old were you?"

"I guess like twelve. It's not Scorsese."

"Well that's why you thought it was boring, then. It's not supposed to be for twelve-year-olds. You'd like it if you -"

"Whatever, it's boring. And it's Coppola."

"Bad. Wrong. Uncultured," Will scolds, throwing pennies at Mike's chest. "And now I've lost count, look what you've done. I have to start over. This is your fault."

"You did this," Mike intones, launching into a years-old inside joke, and Will jumps onboard to say at the same time, " *You* did this. The crackers were *your* responsibility! You have *wasted crackers!*"

They laugh. It gives Mike the courage to keep talking, before Will can start counting again. "I do wanna do this, you know."

And maybe that's why he brought up the money in the first place. Maybe it's a bad habit he picked up from his parents. Money equals worth. Money equals weight. Money equals commitment. Maybe he's a little more like his father than he thought.

Will glances up, confused for a moment, and then he gets it and looks

back down. "I know. You told me."

"Yeah, but."

They haven't really *talked* about this. And frankly Mike hasn't wanted to. It's just too awkward, too hard to know how to approach it. What are they allowed to say? What are they allowed to acknowledge? What's too much? How uncomfortable is it going to be?

But he's not going to avoid it anymore. He decided that, and he's sticking to it. He's not gonna be the person that avoids any and all uncomfortable topics and buries conflicts. He's not *that* much like his dad.

Mike takes a breath and slides nickels around on the tabletop, arranging them into patterns. "I dunno, I just," *I'm scared, I feel like I've been holding us back but I'm afraid of what will happen if I stop*, "I don't know how to do this. And I -"

"You've been doing great," Will says, echoing what Mike once told him about kissing.

Mike looks at him, skeptical.

"You're doing great," he repeats. He looks at Mike for a moment and says, as if in afterthought, "You know, I - I don't want you to - you don't have to -" He huffs in frustration and busies his hands with the coins, flicking pennies to Mike's side of the table like they're playing air hockey. Mike flicks them back. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable. This shouldn't be something uncomfortable. You know? Like, that's not what I want this to be."

*You're wrong*, Mike thinks.

Growing pains are a fact of life. Testing your boundaries is never *comfortable*. And Mike's boundaries are too narrow, too tightly defined for this, and it's never going to work if he doesn't push himself past them.

So, yes, Mike *should* be uncomfortable.

He has to be.

But he doesn't know how to explain all that to Will.

So maybe he just has to try it out. Put his plan to the test.

He remembers too late that he's supposed to answer. "I know. I'm not," he lies, "I'm just getting used to... You know."

He puts down the little pile of pennies he had been bouncing in his palm, stepping around the corner of the table. Into Will's space. Will's eyebrows rise a degree as he lifts his chin to look up at him. Mike's heart is pounding for what feels like the millionth time this month. He swears he's going to have a heart attack at the ripe old age of eighteen after all this. He was going to wait. He was going to wait until the next time *Will* kissed *him*, and then try out his plan, but he's too impatient now. He just wants to do it, to get it over with, because he can't stand waiting any longer to see what happens.

And the first step is asking. It seems so simple, doesn't it? They're just words. But even this is a vulnerability. Asking for what he wants is admitting that he *wants* something, that he wants *this*, and any desire can be a weakness in the wrong hands. Admitting that he wants this is allowing Will a glimpse into something he's been fighting like hell to keep hidden.

The whole sentence is too daunting to attempt, so after a second Mike just holds out an arm, looks at the floor behind Will and mumbles, "Kiss?"

Will seems to process this for a second. Mike hasn't explicitly asked like that, not since the first time. They just kind of do it, often wordlessly, and then walk away without talking about it.

Will moves in. Stepping close and lifting his hands to cup Mike's face, pausing to study him for a moment. Mike tries not to duck his head and twist his face away. He's not used to that. To being *looked* at like that. He's not a remarkably attractive guy, never has been, and he has long associated scrutiny with ridicule. But Will often pauses here, just a few inches away, looking Mike over. Doubtless, examining all the awkward, ugly humanness and imperfections. The chapped lips and the blemishes, shiny skin and unruly hair.



Mike is never sure what he's looking for. But today, just like every other day, Will seems to deem Mike's physical form as *good enough*, and gives up the inspection to tilt in.

*Maybe everyone is right.*

That's what Mike has been thinking, these past few days, ever since he had his bleary epiphany at 3:00am.

*Maybe I am trading my Manliness Card or whatever for an easier life, little by little.*

*Maybe I am slowly giving up my chance to be a normal person and have a normal life.*

*Maybe it is a slippery slope, and every second that I allow this to happen is another inch forward that I can't go back.*

*Maybe I'm giving away some part of myself in exchange for protection and support and affection and maybe even a chance at my dreams.*

*But is that so bad? I don't like myself that much, anyway. Losing a little bit of myself wouldn't be that much of a loss, all things considered.*

So now, with Will's lips warm and real against his own, he resists the habitual urge to put emotional distance between himself and what's happening. He willfully unwinds his muscles, even as Will settles into the kiss, taking another half-step forward to press their torsos together. He tries to relax, and he focuses, and he opens himself up. Raw and trembling but fighting hard against his own instinct to shrink back and close up again, and he focuses on just accepting. And if it's poison that he's taking into his veins, into his being, fine. Good. Let it poison him. It might even feel good, *be* good for him, in a strange, counterintuitive kind of way. Like peeling up an old scab or sinking into a too-hot bath.

But the thing is, it doesn't feel like a loss. Even when Will slips his tongue into Mike's mouth, pulling Mike a little harder against him by the hips, seeming to sense that this kiss is different somehow. Mike has finally stopped holding Will at an emotional arm's length, and Will seems to know that immediately, to see that, and he's moving

into that space without hesitation. Taking the reins that Mike is shakily offering. Will explores this new dynamic, this new space to breathe and move, with an inquisitive verve. He pulls back to cock his head at Mike, questioning, curious, and then moves in again, and this time Mike feels himself being gently backed up against the counter as Will licks into his mouth.

And just like that, Mike feels less in control of the situation, of himself, than he ever has before.

He feels a noise begin in his chest, and this time, instead of swallowing it, he pries open his throat and tries to let himself react. It's a small, clipped noise, cut short by ingrained reticence, but it's there. And Will hears it. And he smiles. And Mike slips another few inches, another few *feet* down that slippery slope, panics for a second, scrabbles frantically to stop himself... and then exhales and lets himself go.

It doesn't feel like how Mike expected. He doesn't feel like any part of himself is being burned away. He doesn't feel like he's losing something, he feels... full. Will folds into him, slipping his arms around Mike's waist to push his hands into Mike's back pockets, and Mike feels himself folding back. He melts into the kisses, letting Will set the pace from chaste to open-mouthed to breathless, heads moving and twisting to re-align themselves, Will's teeth digging into his lower lip, and he thinks, *Oh god, oh god*. He's in freefall. He feels completely out of control, completely helpless, lost, dizzy. At Will's mercy. It's terrifying. And deeply, almost primally cathartic. Like an intangible hand has reached right into Mike's core, right past all his walls and mental blocks and safeguards like they aren't even there, and plucked at something so deep within him, so sensitive and tender, that it's unbearable. Almost painful in its intensity, though it doesn't hurt. It's like some string, some wire or knot tied up in the depths of him, has been deftly and mercilessly snipped. There's a feeling of release. Small, but deep. Fundamental.

Something has shifted, inside him, some pillar has crumbled or some scale has tipped, and with it, *everything* has tipped. *Everything* has shifted. He can feel it the way he feels a shudder of thunder in a summer storm. In his ribs, in his lungs. And everything in him screams to withdraw, to shut down, to slam down his mental walls

and shut everything out and reject this, protect himself, protect... whatever *that* was, whatever Will just brushed up against in Mike's psyche. And he almost does. He shudders and comes *this* close to pulling away, stepping back, saying, *Never mind, I changed my mind, I can't do this, it's too much, it's too, I can't, I can't, I'm sorry.*

But just as Mike twitches, right on the shivering edge of closing himself off, Will eases up with a sigh. Breaking the kiss gently, giving Mike room to suck in a breath and gather himself, lapsing away from that point of panic he had been approaching.

They pant for a moment, still pressed together, Will's hands still resting in Mike's back pockets in a way that makes him want to squirm. If Will moved just a little further and flexed his fingers he'd be dangerously close to cupping Mike's ass, and he's trying to ignore -

No. No, don't ignore. That's not allowed, not anymore. Let it in, acknowledge it, accept it.

He rests his forehead against Will's, his whole body warm like he has a fever, and makes himself imagine it for a split-second. What would it feel like if Will *did* reach down a little further and -?

He can't even complete the thought, but he shudders again anyway.

*Okay, he thinks, That's enough for now. I can't -*

And that was exactly the wrong thing to think, because something stubborn and defiant inside him immediately rears up and says, *Oh, yeah?*

He wants to prove that he can do this. He *can* do this, he's stronger than the walls in his own mind.

So even though it was almost too much - *was* too much last time, Mike re-centers himself and gently tugs Will back in, and Will obliges with a sigh. Mike concentrates on keeping himself present. Grounded. Open. He concentrates on allowing Will's fingers, which are moving to his hips now, to send a fizzy wave of energy through Mike's abdomen and legs, making his muscles feel a little weak. Allowing the soft, hot touch of Will's tongue to send a warm little shock

through him. Allowing his breath to catch when Will's other hand slides hesitantly up the back of Mike's neck to play with his hair - and, *oh*, that does feel good.

He concentrates on staying receptive. Not freezing up or shutting out the sensations, even though they're overwhelming. Not locking down his reactions, this time, hiding them away behind a stoic mask. He fights fear and instinct, telling them, *not now, not here, I don't need you right now*, and lets himself sigh and lean into Will's touch, just a little, just enough.

And it's a little easier this time, to keep his walls down when all they want to do is bounce right back up every time he's not looking at them. It's just a degree easier this time to feel, and accept, and even *relax*. And the frantic, ingrained flutter of resistance within him begins to ease. Not as loud in his ears, not as anxiety-inducing.

Will seems to sense the shift. Maybe he feels when a modicum of tension melts from Mike's frame, or he feels Mike's pulse slow under his fingertips, because he seems to lose a little of his own control. He paws at Mike's head, using the other hand to grip his hip, turning them, leaning *himself* back against the counter so that Mike can lean over him. Mike gives in to the request, pinning Will in place, one hand braced on the counter behind him. Their hips are pressed together, he realizes with a hard *swoop* of blood rushing south. He feels a little lightheaded, and - for the first time, in Technicolor clarity - he feels the animal urge to thrust.

"God," he heaves, pulling away at last, taking a half step back so he *can't* obey that urge.

Is that how fast it happens? *That* fast? A few kisses and a little struggle against the ingrained feeling that he should pull back - and already he's slipping away? Slippery slope, indeed. It's already so much easier to brush aside those ingrained blockades in his mind. Twelve days and a handful of kisses, and eighteen years of socialization are dissolving away already.

Maybe he's a little further gone than he thought, drunk on his own personal trip into the subconscious, because he finds himself panting aloud, "How are you so good at that?"

Will flushes, pleased, making no attempt to remove himself from between Mike and the counter. "I am?" Mike can't answer, but Will doesn't seem to need one, because he beams shyly at the floor and says, "I just. You know. Pick stuff up from movies. Or books. And." He shifts his weight back and forth, reaching back to prop his hands on the counter. "I've spent kind of a long time thinking about how I'd kiss you."

And that's it, that's the thing that finally does it. The thing that tips Mike over into true overwhelm, and he has to pull back fully this time. Gratefully retreating behind the familiar safety of his walls with a mish-mash of adrenaline and fear and pleasure and so, so many things racing around in his veins.

Will lets him go without further comment. He doesn't ask Mike what that was all about or why he stopped so suddenly, though he throws him a bemused glance or two, and for that Mike is deeply grateful.

They return to counting out Mike's savings - they have to start all over again - and Mike thinks, no, he *knows* for sure that he's completely and entirely fucked. But that doesn't scare him quite as much as it did yesterday.

*That was bad*, the familiar voice gnaws, cold and slimy and insistent, *You're damning yourself, you know that? You're ruining yourself.*

*Yeah, well*, Mike thinks, finally finishing the bills and moving on to help Will with nickels and pennies. *I think I'll probably get used to that.*

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

I wanted to split this chapter in half because it's long, but there wasn't really a good halfway point, so... have a hell a long chapter.

As always, I love hearing your thoughts! :D

P.S. did I forget who directed the Godfather? Yes. Did I sneak back and act like it was the characters' mistake and not mine? Also yes.

## 4. Yes/No

November 1988

Something changed.

Will can't tell *what*, exactly, but... something is different. Something... good. He thinks. Ever since that electrifying kiss in the kitchen, when Mike brought over a pickle jar full of bills and coins and *insisted* that Will accept half of it, Mike has been -

Will doesn't even know how to describe it. It's like Mike is more sensitive - but no, that's not quite right. More responsive, maybe. Like he's letting Will in in a way that he never has before.

He doesn't know. It could be all in his head, wishful thinking compounded upon misinterpretation tied up in a bow of projection.

But it *can't* all be in his head, because Mike's breath catching audibly in his throat when Will slips his fingertips under the hem of Mike's shirt -

Mike's soft contented sighs and clipped little noises that he makes against Will's lips -

The little shiver-squirm Mike does when Will squeezes his hips over the sturdy material of his jeans and belt -

Those are real.

They're real, and new, and endlessly fascinating to Will. Mike never used to let those responses show. He was always vaguely reserved during their kisses - not aloof, but controlled, deliberate. And sometimes he still is, kissing Will with a half-detached kind of careful curiosity, like Will is a specimen that may or may not be dangerous. Affectionate, to be sure, and gentle, and warm - but not vulnerable. Not *open*.

But sometimes... sometimes, now, some extra little bit of magic kicks in, and Mike relaxes into Will's touch. Will can feel it, like a shift in gravity. He knows to look for it, now, to wait for it, rubbing his

hands over Mike's shoulders and nuzzling his face against his partner's until - if he's lucky - that extra little bit of tension evaporates from Mike's frame, tension Will didn't know was there until it was gone, and it's like a magic button has been pushed. Gradually, Mike eases out from behind his mask. And if Will is patient, if he's gentle and subtle and doesn't look directly at it, he gets to hold this magic thing in his hands for a little while. Mike, with his walls down. Groaning quietly and twitching, shifting, moving under the smallest touch of Will's hands, without trying to hide or repress the reaction. Expressions playing openly across his face. Sagging against Will like the effort of maintaining his usual blockades exhausts him. Or, just as often, clutching Will to him like he'll disappear otherwise. Fierce and eager, fingers digging into the skin of Will's torso like maybe he's afraid of losing this too. Those kisses are Will's favorite.

It happens when they aren't kissing, too - though not as often. As loud and effusive as Mike can be, wearing his heart on his sleeve, Will is starting to realize just how many walls he has up on the daily. It's an inescapable fact of growing up in this world, he supposes. But once Mike starts opening himself up to Will in their makeout sessions, it starts happening in other moments as well.

Will is storming around the Wheeler's basement one night, ranting and raving about a particularly nasty, hurtful fight he had with Jonathan, and when he throws himself down on the couch he realizes that he's not the only one sniffing shallowly and blinking back a few tears.

He looks at Mike in surprise, brushing at his face with the back of a hand. "What?"

Mike laughs and presses his own sleeve against one eye. "I dunno. You're upset, I'm upset. I dunno."

He gives another sheepish, watery laugh, and Will can't help but lean over and place a kiss on his lips, despite the slight dampness of both their faces.

(And, oh, it's getting so easy to do that. Too easy. Will is afraid he's starting to take it for granted, not appreciate it enough, that he can

just lean over and nudge their lips together without having to ask, without an ounce of panic or second-guessing.)

Another time, Mike shuffles his feet in the doorway of Will's bedroom, backpack dangling off one shoulder. They're starting to make goodbye-noises, winding down for the day after hanging out after school. Except, Mike clearly has something he wants to say. He's been dilly-dallying like he's getting paid for it, leaning against the doorframe oh-so-casually as they continue to not say goodbye.

Will is about to grab him by the shoulders and demand, *oh, for godssake, what?* when Mike, almost in the middle of Will's sentence, says, "Dyoumindifstaytonight?"

"Do I mind if you... stay?" Will echoes, trying to untangle the lump of syllables into individual words, and Mike shrugs. Glancing off down the hallway like he's bored, like this isn't really that important to him. Walls up.

"If you don't want. I mean, if you mind. Fuck - if you want, if you don't mind. I just thought we could -"

He looks like he's about to bail, embarrassment flushing his cheeks despite how nonchalant he's trying to be, so Will cuts him off.

"Yeah, sure. You wanna finish that game we started last -?"

Mike speaks over him abruptly, as if trying to force something out before he can talk himself out of it. "I just, I can't sleep?"

That gets Will's attention, and when he looks back at Mike he swears the walls are down again. Mike is staring at his feet, his face red as an apple, but his gaze flickers up to Will for a moment before he goes on. "I mean, you know I have weeks sometimes where I just can't fall asleep, no matter what, and it's - it's *bad* this time, and I sleep better with you."

He says the last part in a rush, then stands there waiting for judgement, and Will stares at him for a moment before breaking out into a wide grin that he hides by dropping his face and pretending to do something at his shelf.



*Yeah, he almost says, Me too. I sleep better with you, too. Truth is, I try to suggest sleepovers a lot now because I really, really like sharing a bed with you. I like that we wake up cuddling, sometimes, even though we didn't go to sleep that way and we never say anything about it in the morning, and I like how warm you make the whole bed, and I like that I can still smell you on my blankets afterwards, and I like that if I have a nightmare it doesn't last very long because you shake me awake and hug me until my heart stops racing. Every time we get up in the morning I wish we didn't have to, because I never know if you'll allow that again, and I don't know if I can go the rest of my life knowing what it feels like to wake up in your arms but never experience it again. So, yes, yes, please stay. You can pull me from my nightmares and maybe I can help you sleep.*

Of course, he doesn't say a single bit of that. What he says is, "Oh. Well, yeah. I don't mind. Dipshit, why didn't you say this a week ago? No wonder you've been a zombie."

He's trying to push through it by being casual, poking a little fun to get Mike to smile back, and it works.

Mike gives Will's head a shove. "Look who's talking. Didn't you say you worked on that comic until 2:00am last night?"

Will gives a theatrical laugh, placing a hand over his heart, hamming it up for his best friend. "Oh, Michael, you of all people know I don't sleep."

But he does. That night, and the next, when Mike sneaks over again to climb through the window at bedtime. Will does sleep, those nights, and he's relieved when Mike does, too.

The second night also marks a new first for them. They've kissed plenty, by now, and shared a bed at least half a dozen to a dozen times, but never both at once. This time, when Will wakes partway through the night from an all-too-familiar nightmare, he wakes not to a hand on his shoulder but a soft, dry mouth touching his forehead, his cheeks, his nose, his lips. Mike is clumsy and half-asleep, muttering vague comforts, and Will wonders if he even realizes he did it. As usual, neither of them say anything about it in the morning. But Will remembers.

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They don't really know what they're doing, how to navigate this, so it's slow going for a while. They coast along, going about their lives the same as always, with tiny but weighty changes marking the difference between two months ago and now.

Will wants to tear his hair out, to be perfectly honest.

He can't stand this limbo, this in-between feeling of purgatory. But how can he complain? It's hard enough to put into words within his own mind, let alone aloud. And anyway, there's no way he's gonna imply to Mike that he's unhappy with this. Because he is happy. Really, truly, *tentatively* happy, still not quite daring to fully believe it, still surprised at every turn by the life he suddenly finds himself in. He's out to Mike. He's *out* to somebody - and not just in the unspoken, unacknowledged way that he's pretty sure his mom suspects him, but *really* out. And it's okay. It's fine, and he's fine. Somebody looked at him and saw him for what he is, the strange and unnatural being that he is, and he wasn't cast away, wasn't shunned, wasn't hurt or harassed or any awful thing that has kept him firmly in the closet with the door locked. Mike saw a part of Will that hasn't seen daylight since he himself realized what it was, and instead of backing away, Mike accepted it. He pulled Will close to him and said, with his words and actions, *I care about you, I value you, I value the place you have in my life, I want you to stay and I want to do this together, at least for a little while.*

And that should be enough. That should be so, so much more than enough. It's so much more than Will ever dared to hope for.

But he thought things would change. He thought some sort of new thing would start, and it's just... it's not starting.

Maybe it's stupid. Or childish. It's not like he waved a magic wand and rearranged the very structure of his day-to-day life. Of course things are mainly the same - with some very key differences. It's just so *weird* between them, a lot of the time. Sure, they share a bed or a sleeping bag when they sleep over now, and there's the kissing, and there are the little gestures and conversations that wouldn't have happened before. But they're constantly dancing around it, feinting and withdrawing, too afraid of ruining this tenuous balance to risk

pushing any farther. Will doesn't know if it's too much to hold Mike's hand under the table when they play D&D with the Party. Mike keeps seeming to be on the cusp of saying something, but he never does. Will keeps wondering if they're going to talk about college, with how quickly it seems to be coming up, and Mike shies away from anything that might be considered *extended cuddling* - though he always seems regretful about it, like he wanted to stay right where he was.

They've been making *little* changes, *little* adjustments, and those little things add up. But they're running out of little things. They're reaching the end of the runway, coming to a point where they either have to turn around and return to normalcy, or take off into whatever's next. And instead of doing either, they've come to a dead halt in-between.

And they can't just sit here forever.

Or, well, maybe they can. But Will really, really, really doesn't want to.

Maybe the problem is that neither of them really know where the boundaries are. What's going to drive the other away. What's allowed. It seems like they're constantly stuck in the direct middle of a see-saw. Like they're pinned in place, one foot still planted in platonic friendship and all the hangups and boundaries entailed, while the other is hovering over the line, not quite knowing where or how to step.

The tipping point comes on a Monday.

Mike has clearly been giving as much as he's able to, opening himself up to this, to Will. His energy is probably fairly well depleted by that alone - he had a much bigger leap to take into this relationship than Will, after all. So, if this is gonna change, if this uncomfortable limbo is going to dissolve... it's up to Will. If he wants something to change, he's gonna have to do something about it.

He stumbles across this thought in the middle of math class on the worst day of the week, and he brightens at the little breakthrough - and then immediately hits another wall.

Because the next question is, *how?*

He goes through three days of increasingly pointless and convoluted thought experiments, shaky plans discarded one after the other, and mounting frustration before Dustin happens to toss out the phrase *Occam's Razor* in a conversation.

*The simplest explanation is usually the best one.*

What's the simplest answer here? If Will wants more, if he thought things would change more than they have...

Two memories flash to mind, merging and melding as they overlap in Will's brainspace: Mike beside the kitchen table, holding out an arm with his bangs flopping in his face (*Kiss?*), and Mike shuffling his feet in the doorway of Will's bedroom (*Dyoundidistaytonight?*).

Maybe Will just needs to ask. Maybe it's as simple as that.

But he doesn't know how to ask for everything. It barely makes sense in his own mind; how is he supposed to turn his hazy and ambiguous yearning into a straightforward request? *Can we actually start now?*

*Can I touch you without constantly doubting that I've crossed some line?*

*Don't get me wrong, it's been amazing, you've been amazing, but I just... I'm greedy. I want more. I want this to be real, and I know that's asking too much, because we already agreed that that's not what this is. I know I said partner, but what I meant was boyfriend, what I meant was lover, what I meant was I love you and I hate this stiff, awkward buffer between us, even though we're closer than ever, and -*

*Can we just go ahead and do this or end this? Because I'm gonna grind my teeth to nubs if we don't do one or the other.*

But none of that would be useful.

So, instead, he starts asking for the little things.

He starts with the kisses, because that's easy. That's nearing second nature, by now. That's how they *started* this whole thing, on the beat-up couch in the Wheeler's basement.

Will never expected that, when he made his proposition. He thought, if Mike even *considered* this partnership, it would be very businesslike. Sharing money, maybe sharing a car eventually, sharing a living space to split rent if they got that far, and maybe just enough closeness and affection to raise straight-laced eyebrows. Maybe Mike would bring up the kissing eventually - or maybe the sex would come first, as they took advantage of their little bubble of immunity. Maybe hand jobs in the dark, unacknowledged come morning, would be more palatable to Mike than touching his mouth to another guy's.

So when Mike said, *I was thinking I should maybe kiss you*, not thirty seconds after agreeing to this arrangement, Will was so gobsmacked he could barely think.

And it's been wonderful. Maybe he's just a horny teenager drunk on his first real relationship - as much as this relationship can be called *real* - but he doesn't think he'll ever get tired of the kissing. It's pleasurable, sure, and all too often he has to concentrate hard to will away a boner - *shit* he hopes Mike hasn't noticed that - but it's more than that. It's affection and affirmation and reassurance, and Will is troubled to realize how much he's come to rely on it. The kisses say *I'm here, and you're here, and no matter how shitty the world is, there's this little good thing. You're not alone. Breathe.*

The kissing is easy. They can do that, no problem.

So he starts there.

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The first time Will asks, it's nothing all that dramatic. They're just in the AV room at the end of the lunch hour, hurrying to shove binders and notebooks into their backpacks, and Mike glances up at the sound of Will's voice.

"Can I have a kiss?"

It earns him a curious tilt of Mike's head. They don't usually *talk* about it, they just do it. Normally Will would just walk up to him, get in his space, and steal a kiss before turning on his heel and heading for the door without a word beyond, "See you in fifth!"

But he asks, this time, and Mike tilts his head curiously, but he doesn't hesitate to lean down to where Will is perched on a stool and fit their lips together. Will kisses back, lifting a hand to brush a thumb over Mike's ear. And that's that. Will leaves with his cheeks stinging, embarrassed from saying that aloud, and for the rest of the day nothing happens.

He forgets to ask the next time, when they're hanging out in Mike's room with a record playing.

But he remembers again the time after that, when they're alone for just a moment in the Henderson's living room and the resulting peck is lightning-quick out of necessity.

And again, when it's cold out and he wants to steal - *borrow* Mike's jacket. It's something he's always wanted to do, but hasn't thought to ask for. This time, he does ask.

He forgets to ask if they can just hold each other for a few minutes, after one particularly bad day - or, more like he chickens out. But he manages to fight through his awkwardness and mumble out a request to go their separate ways for the weekend when he's facing social overwhelm and just wants to be a hermit.

Forget, remember, forget. It's hit or miss. Will has to remind himself to *ask* for what he wants and needs when it comes to affection or attention, because they're both new to this, to each other, and otherwise Mike won't know. But slowly, over a couple weeks, it starts becoming a habit. *Can I have a kiss? Can I have a hug? Can I vent to you? Can we cuddle? Can we take some time apart for a couple days? Can I wear your jacket?*

Will rejoices the first time Mike says no - because that means that Mike knows he *can* say no. It means that the *yes* actually means something, when it's given. He was getting worried, for a while there. But, Will is discovering, Mike says yes a lot because he's rarely not in the mood to give or receive physical affection. Mike is, to Will's quiet joy, a much more cuddly, affectionate, demonstrative being than Will ever suspected. Once Mike has an outlet, it pours forth. He's like a puppy, constantly leaning against Will's shoulder and sticking his cold nose against Will's cheek and playfully pawing at him for

attention.

And Will rejoices again, tenfold, when *Mike* starts asking. Shyly, at first, but it's barely a week before he starts getting used to it.

*Do you have room in your brain for me to rant to you right now?*

*Can I sit with you?*

*Can you get off me so I can breathe?*

*Can I kiss you?*

*Mind if I fall asleep on you?*

*Can I have a bite?*

*Wanna hold hands?*

It's not always verbal. Especially as they settle into it, the requests start to become signals, hand motions, expressions. A nudge, a glance, a gesture. A silent shorthand, sometimes accompanied by wordless mumbles, that nobody else on Earth could possibly understand. It joins their lexicon of inside jokes and best-friend-dialect; a language for two.

Will says no more often than Mike. But, thankfully, it doesn't seem to dissuade him. In fact, like Will, he seems relieved. With the *yes* and *no* system, they can set their own boundaries moment-to-moment, without broad, semi-arbitrary "rules." Without lines in the sand, as Mike would put it.

And as November swirls its way into icy December, the end of the semester dragging the whole Party through the grueling slog of finals, the limbo starts to fade away.

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Will should have known the hickeys would catch up with him and bite him in the ass. It's just, he stopped being quite so paranoid about them weeks ago, after he'd successfully hidden at least three without incident. And with final tests and projects coming up, and the holidays, and some minor drama with Lonnie riling up his mother,

he's had plenty of other things to worry about. It just slips his mind, this time, to urge Mike further down his neck as they lean against a wall in Mike's kitchen, taking advantage of the alone-time granted to them by Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler leaving to shop for Christmas.

It's not unusual for Will to sport a turtleneck this winter. Mike nearly marked up his neck the first time they ever kissed, in fact.

He seems to relish kissing down Will's throat, nosing along a pulse point and teasing, digging his teeth in minutely here and there before settling on a fleshy spot to bite down on, the pull of his mouth hard and exquisite, leaving Will to toss his head back and pant, twitching and shuddering with the acute desire for Mike to touch him.

With Mike's body pressed against his, Mike's mouth latched onto his skin in a way that's deliciously, pleasurably painful, Will has to fight hard against the compulsion to buck his hips against Mike's, just to create some friction, *any* friction. And Mike is making little sounds, a shallow breath sucked in through his nose and a clipped, muffled groan that buzzes through Will's skin, and it's not *fair*, because what Will wants most in the whole *world* right now is for Mike to reach down and cup him, rub him through his jeans.

The thought makes a reverse-gasp burst through his lips. He's so desperate for stimulation that he starts to squirm, fighting tooth and nail not to start rolling his hips against Mike's body the way he would with a pillow, late at night when he can't help himself from pouring over the memories of their boldest kisses. Kisses that are all the more precious because he never knows which will be the last. Mike could call this off any moment. Will has to savor the kisses he gets, store them away in his mind like fireflies in a jar, commit them to memory for when they inevitably leave his life for good.

*Except*, a stupid, hopeful little voice whispers in the back of his head, *maybe not. Maybe he'll stay. Maybe you get to keep him. Maybe this can be a good thing, after all the bad. Maybe he'll decide that he wants this, wants us, and...*

But he knows that's not how this works. That's not how life works. The other shoe will drop. It always does. He can't count on anything good staying for too long; some tragedy or disaster always strikes



sooner than later, dashing any hopes of long-lasting happiness. He just has to appreciate this good thing while it's here. He has to soak it in, bathe in it, take it into his very pores, as much as he possibly can, before it's gone.

And maybe that's why his concentration lapses for a second, right when Mike gives a last sweet pull of suction at the same time that his fingers dig into the ticklish spot just under Will's ribs. Before Will realizes what he's doing, his hips give a couple shallow little thrusts, eager and reflexive, against Mike's. It's a quick and languid motion, *one-two*, over as soon as it begins - and, oh, it feels *good*, that pressure, that motion, Mike's solid warmth against his body - but Will freezes the second he realizes what he did.

Mike goes still too, breath catching, his mouth slipping off of Will's neck but not moving away. Warm, damp lips just barely brush the sore, sensitized skin, making goosebumps crawl over Will's throat and down his arms and spine, and he starts to pull away, sheepish, eyes downcast.

"Sorry," he mumbles.

He's mortified. He wants to disappear. God, he really is like everyone says, isn't he? He really is a menace. He gets a boy pressed up against him, kissing sweetly down his neck, and he can't control himself. He reacts like an animal.

Mike stops him as he tries to turn away. "Sokay," he mumbles back. His voice sounds a little rough, maybe strained - Will probably just made him deeply uncomfortable, humping up against him like a fucking dog, making this dirty and sexual when all Mike wanted was a kiss and an embrace.

Mike is trying to duck his head to meet Will's eyes, but Will keeps his head down, the backs of his eyes burning with shame. He shakes his head, rejecting that - it's *not* okay, he knows it isn't - but Mike still won't let Will squirm away.

"It's okay," Mike is saying again, but Will can only avoid his eyes and say, "I didn't mean - *fuck*, Jesus, I -"

"It's okay."

"I'm sorry."

"It's *okay*. "

"I'm really sorry."

Mike gives a frustrated little sigh, dropping his head for a moment so his bangs flop in his eyes, before lifting his head and flicking them back again. It's a set of gestures he's had for over a decade, a rhythm ingrained in Will's mind as deeply as the beat of his favorite song. Will can tell that's what Mike did, even without looking up, just by the sigh and the smudges of movement in his peripheral vision.

Mike finally releases him, letting Will drift away awkwardly, trying not to *look* like he's running even though that's exactly what he's doing. When he finally looks back at Mike, Mike's face is a little red too.

"You don't have to be sorry," he tells the floor. One shoulder lifts - a red-faced, lopsided shrug. "I didn't mind."

Will examines him critically. Would Mike lie to make him feel better?

Maybe.

Would he? They don't usually play mind games like that, but then, things are different between them now.

After a moment Will settles on bluntness. "Don't bullshit me."

Mike looks up, jaw set, meeting Will's eyes just long enough to say, "I'm not," before his gaze skips away again. But he wanders a couple feet closer, sticking his hands in his pockets to try to look casual. "I mean it. I don't care. I didn't mind."

And just like that, another thought shoulders its way into Will's mind, too enticing to dismiss. *Does Mike... want that?*

Will offered sex, when they first talked about this. And, after all, Mike is a teenage guy. Will has caught him checking out girls' asses

enough - not to mention overhearing Mike quietly groaning in his sleep a few times at sleepovers, moving and shifting in his sleeping bag - that Will knows he has, well, needs. Desires. Would Mike want to release that pressure with Will? Would *he* want to grind against Will, maybe, kissing until he couldn't anymore, panting against Will's cheek until he jolted and groaned? Would Will want that? He thinks about Mike clutching him tightly to his chest, rolling or snapping his hips against Will's, feeling each other hard even through their pants, kissing open-mouthed and sloppy. He feels his dick twitch in his pants, beginning to stiffen again after his excitement was doused with mortification. And he thinks, *Fuck, yes.*

They'd be lying down, maybe, on the couch, or maybe even on Mike's bed, Mike's weight trapping Will comfortably against the mattress. Or maybe he'd want Will to lie over him, instead, knees parted around Mike's legs, elbows braced on either side of Mike's head as Mike gripped his hips and pulled Will down to grind against him. He takes a deep breath in, feeling lightheaded.

*I could suck you off*, Will thinks, almost feverish for a split second, and he *almost* says it, he comes so close to just blurting it - *I could suck you off. I want to suck you off. I've thought about it before. I've imagined your cock in my mouth. Yeah, I really am that much of a fucking freak, but I don't care. If you want that, if you want that kind of release, I'll do it. Gladly.*

Images flash through his mind - gently pushing Mike back against the counter, kneeling to undo his belt and zipper, freeing Mike from the layers of fabric and licking from base to tip just to see what he tastes like. Getting to hear what kind of sounds Mike makes. Getting to work him to completion, probably fumbling from inexperience, but determined. It'd be something he'd be able to give Mike, a gift of sorts, a *thank you* for giving this whole thing a chance, giving Will a chance.

Will's heart is racing.

Does Mike want that? Is that what the red cheeks and shallow breath mean - not that Mike was uncomfortable, but that he was... turned on? By Will? Is it possible? Is it too much to hope for?

Will's mouth opens, but he immediately gets cold feet, switching tracks at the speed of light to instead drift another foot closer and say, "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Cut it out, stop apologizing. It's not a big deal."

Mike slings an arm out to hook Will by the waist and pull him in - a motion that's becoming familiar to both of them, lately - and Will sighs into the soft, quick kiss that Mike offers. Okay. Okay, so, not everything is ruined. Mike isn't making shallow excuses and running for the door, or pushing Will away with a grossed-out laugh - *Dude, what the fuck? Don't do that. God.*

He said he didn't mind what happened, and he might even mean it. He might even want more. But Will can't offer that now. He can't. It was enough of a risk, thrusting against Mike's hip on instinct like that. No way he's breaking the kiss and saying, *Hey, want a blow job?*

Instead, as his gaze lands on a pile of the Wheelers' mail on the counter, he broaches another subject that's been on the brain. Something he's been putting off addressing, because it represents more commitment than anything they've done so far. And this could be it, this could be the line that Mike won't cross, and if that happens, then what?

But this particular issue won't keep for another two months. The deadlines are coming up faster than Will can believe.

Will keeps his eyes fixed on the small tower of college pamphlets on the counter as he mumbles, "You thought about where you wanna go?"

Mike follows his line of sight, blowing out a heavy breath when he sees what they're talking about. "Fuck, I dunno. All the places I like, my parents don't. All the places they like, I hate."

A car crunches up the snowy road and they pull apart, drifting to opposite corners of the kitchen, but it's not Mike's parents. Just a neighbor returning home a few houses away.

Will, aiming for nonchalance and missing by a mile, says, "You think

you wanna..." His voice fades out and he makes a gesture linking the two of them together. "You know. Try to get into the same campus, or whatever?"

Mike runs his tongue over his teeth the way he does when he's weighing his options. Will braces himself, proud of how neutral his expression is.

After a moment that feels like an hour, Mike says, "Isn't that the idea?"

"Well, yeah." Will's heart skips a little. It was? "But..."

But if they start planning this, if they start looking at states and cities and colleges together, that's a step down a road that's much harder to reverse than a simple agreement. That's a step - a small step, but a step - towards planning and living a life together. It's not exactly a binding contract, they're not getting *married* - not like they could, Will thinks sourly - but this is... big.

Not like they couldn't split up at any time. College campuses are big, they can avoid each other well enough if - when they end this.

Mike picks up a crumpled paper towel from the counter and starts brushing crumbs into a neat little pile, conveniently not looking too long or too hard at Will. "I mean, if you still want to."

"Yeah, yeah." Will gives a measured smile. "Totally."

"Okay, well, where do you wanna go?"

*A big, progressive city where I might fit in*, Will thinks, but he says, "No idea. I mean, I have some cities I've been looking at, but I've barely started looking at colleges."

"Yeah, me neither." Mike tosses the paper towel and turns to lean against the corner of the counter, arms crossed conversationally. "You think out of state, though, or...?"

"Oh yeah. Definitely. No, fuck this state." That makes Mike laugh, which makes Will laugh as he reiterates, "For sure."

“Yeah, I wasn’t too excited about staying. Seems like I’ve already *been* here, you know? Like, I wanna go experience something other than what I’ve been experiencing for the past two decades, almost. Plus, if I stay in state my parents are gonna expect me to visit every other weekend.”

“God,” Will groans. “Can you imagine *my* mom, though? She’d be dropping by the campus with anticipatory cold medicine and cans of soup and asking if I made any friends yet.”

Mike snorts, then pulls down the corners of his mouth. “So... out of state, then?”

Will smiles - a real one, this time. “Yeah.”

“Good. Great. That’s, uh, one narrowed down, forty nine to go.”

They laugh. And then they start the process of planning to tie their lives together in one small, real way.

---

The hickey catches up to him the next day, when Jonathan barges into his room without warning.

“Hey,” his brother says, knocking on the wood of the door full seconds *after* pushing it open. He’s been home from college for a couple days now. *His* finals are already over. “Did you say you were gonna stop by the grocery store tonight?”

Will, halfway through changing clothes - thank god Jonathan barged in when he already had pants on - crosses to his wardrobe and whips a shirt over his head. “Yeah, what do you need?”

The answering silence is troubling. When Will turns, Jonathan is frowning, leaning as if to see something better. “What happened there?”

“What?”

He’s moving now, crossing the room, and Will angles himself away.

“What?” he demands again, but it’s too late. He already saw it.

Jonathan's demeanor turns stormy in an instant, and Will braces himself. "Wait, is that - did somebody hit you?"

Well that's not what he was expecting.

"No," he says, startled into honesty when maybe he should have just gone along with the lie.

"Did somebody *grab* you?" Jon is reaching for his shoulders now, trying to turn Will to face him, his expression all soft concern and hard anger at once. He peers at the edge of the bruise peeking out just above Will's collar. "It looks like a thumb print. Did somebody -?"

Will tries to brush him off, ducking to extract himself and hissing, "It's nothing!"

Jonathan gives him a look that means, *yeah, right*. "Hey. You can talk to me. Talk to me. Was it that Troy guy again, has he been -?"

"No. That hasn't happened since *middle* school." Technically it hasn't happened since the summer between freshman and sophomore year, but Jon doesn't need to know that. Will sighs, arms crossed tightly across his chest. His brother isn't giving up - of course he isn't - and Will already stupidly denied a lie that could have gotten him out of this. With Jonathan hovering between him and the rest of the room, blocking him in the corner, Will mutters, "It's just a love bite, it's nothing."

"A -" Jonathan's face changes in an instant. He looks confused, and then he looks surprised, and then he looks like he's trying not to laugh. He's fighting valiantly to keep his expression neutral, but Will knows his brother. He knows when there's mischief and amusement sparkling just below the surface. "A *hickey*?"

Will bats his hands in the air between them, as if trying to slap away the whole conversation. "Yes. That. Okay? Are we happy, can we go now?"

"Cool," Jonathan says, after a moment, and it's so forced and awkward that Will wants to scream. At least that means the

conversation is over, and they can -

But - horror of horrors - Jonathan isn't stepping away. He's sitting on the edge of Will's mattress, leaving a space like he's trying to invite Will to sit next to him, and *that* is so not happening. "You, uh," he starts, and Will recognizes the tone of a big-brotherly Talk with a Capital T.

*Oh, no.*

*Oh, no, no, no.*

"You guys know you have to -"

"Stop."

"- use some sort of -"

Will presses his hands over his face, feeling how oven-hot his cheeks have become. "Oh, god, I'm begging you, stop."

"No, look, this is important." Now Jonathan looks uncomfortable, too, when Will glares out through between his fingers, but he soldiers on to say, "If you're doing anything, uh, below the belt, then -"

Will scream-groans into his hands. *I'm in hell, I'm in hell, I'm in hell, I'm in hell, I'm -*

"Okay, okay, I get it." He's not looking, but he's willing to bet Jonathan has his hands lifted in a placating gesture. "I know it's - you don't wanna talk about this, but it really can be dangerous to - to - to do things without protection, because if -" He takes a half breath. "- *certain bodily fluids* mix, then that could -"

"Nope!" Will's hands fly off his face and latch onto his brother's arm, dragging him up off the bed and towards the door. "Nope, nope, we're done. Thank you, goodbye, I'm moving to Switzerland now, see you never. Goodbye!"

He tries to shove Jonathan out the door, but Jonathan is bigger, taller, and more determined. "Just promise me you're smart enough to use a condom, okay? I'm serious, Will, STDs are no joke. Especially



right now.”

And Will, in a desperate attempt just to make this conversation *stop*, blurts, “Look, it’s just the *one* - we’re only...” He makes a vague gesture which he immediately regrets, because it’s just meaningless enough that it could mean *anything*. “...with each other, okay? And we’re the first... for each other, so...”

Explaining his and Mike’s plan, aloud, to *someone else*, to his goddamn *brother*, is enough to make Will consider sticking his head in the microwave and turning it on. Not that Jonathan knows it’s Mike, not that he’s *ever* going to know it’s Mike if Will has anything to do with it. But *Will* knows who they’re talking about, even if Jon doesn’t, and it’s making him want to curl up and disappear.

“Well, okay,” Jonathan reasons, “but you can’t be sure if she’s telling the truth about that - I’m just *saying* - and you really don’t want a pregnancy scare if -”

*I am not going to get Mike fucking pregnant!* he wants to scream. Instead he says, “Okay, okay, okay! I promise I will not take any risks of getting anyone pregnant. Okay?”

Jonathan hears the evasion. His eyes narrow. “And you’ll use a condom if -”

“Yes,” Will agrees, slumping against the wall for support as he covers his face again. “Fine. Jesus. We’re not even *there* yet.”

And then he curls in on himself even harder because he realized he said *yet*.

As in, *We’re not having sex, yet*.

He’s been planning on having sex with Mike.

Someday, at some point. Whether he realized it or not, whether it was something conscious or not, Will has been quietly looking forward to having sex with his best friend. His partner. If Mike wants to, of course.

And then all at once he’s imagining what Mike’s face might look like

if Will suggested it, and what he might look like bare-skinned and breathing hard, and if he'd groan and clutch at Will when they -

Will stares pointedly out the window, watching the slushy flakes fall and melt on impact, not caring that it gives Jonathan a direct line of sight to the damning mark on his neck.

"So is this a girlfriend, or -?"

"Jon."

"Right. Leaving."

Jonathan finally, *finally* vacates the doorway, and Will swings it firmly shut behind him.

He tells himself he won't get off to the idea of his partner fully nude and pillowed in the sheets tonight, rhythmically working his hips against Will's with a low, hungry-satisfied groan. He tells himself that if Mike comes over tonight, sneaking through the wet snow and through Will's window to pull one over on insomnia, he won't even *consider* rolling over and whispering, *You know, you could fuck me, if you wanted.*

He tells himself it doesn't turn him on in the slightest, the idea of Mike's eyes going wide as Will whispers it, Mike's cheeks going dark and then his eyes following suit, Mike agreeing and tugging his snow-damp shirt and pants off with sloppy haste. Mike's unruly hair and sharply angled face and his freckles and his long limbs and big, square hands. Mike thrusting into him, softly and slowly so the bed doesn't rock and thump against the wall and wake Will's sleeping family. Mike's mouth coming down just a little too hard on Will's lips to muffle a sound of pleasure. He tells himself he won't be thinking about that for days or weeks, most likely at the most inopportune times.

He is absolutely lying to himself.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Surprise! I had no idea I'd be working on this when I woke up today, but here we are.

Please do let me know what you think, I LOVE to hear y'all's thoughts!

## 5. A Contradiction

December 1988

They have a new game.

It's called "Truth." Sort of like a low-key version of truth or dare.

How it works is simply this: one of them says, "Truth," and then asks a question. *Any* question. Bar none.

*What's your most irrational fear? What's your pipe dream? What's something you've never told anyone else? How do you want to change yourself? What would your ideal self be like? Tell me about one of your fantasies. What was your sexual awakening like? What's the worst thing you've ever done? Do you believe in a god? Do you believe in ghosts? The devil? Demons? Aliens? Fate? What do you believe in? What do you want out of life?*

And the other can either answer honestly - and it *has* to be honest - or they say, "Pass," and that question gets left alone. They take turns, usually. Sometimes it's as simple as a one word or one sentence answer, and on to the other person's turn. Sometimes it sparks conversations that last hours, or delves deep into personal hopes or fears, hangups and traumas, furtive desires and old secrets.

*I stole my desk mate's plastic binoculars in preschool and hid them under the bathroom sink. It was a source of guilt and shame for years.*

*I've always had this weird fantasy about getting shipwrecked on a desert island with someone and having sex on the beach by the bonfire.*

*My favorite recurring dream is one where I'm a snowflake getting blown around a picturesque winter wonderland and it feels like I'm really flying, with all the dives and loops and turns, but I'm never afraid of falling.*

*I smoke sometimes if I think I can sneak one of my mom's without her noticing.*

*Sometimes if things in my head get really bad I burn my skin with Nancy's old curling iron, under my clothes where people won't see. It*

*hasn't happened for a while but there was one summer when I wouldn't go swimming because I was covered with little burns.*

*As a kid I had a crush on Fred. Like... the cartoon character. From Scooby Doo. Okay, you know what, shut up. That's an awfully pejorative laugh for someone who was fucking obsessed with Dewshine from Elfquest - yes, you were!*

*If I had a million dollars I'd open a publishing house and then bring dirigibles back into style, in that order.*

*Some weeks I just can't eat. The thought of putting food in my mouth and swallowing it makes me want to vomit. I don't know what it is. It just comes and goes every few months or so.*

Today, Will asks, "Truth. What do you think happens after you die?"

Mike tilts his head, considering it for several moments while he chews his sandwich. He takes so long that Will half expects him to pass. This would be kind of a strange thing to pass on, considering some of the other things they've talked about - but then again, they are in public right now. It's still early in the lunch period, and this corner of the cafeteria isn't busy. This is the last week before Christmas break. Everyone is in the library or study rooms or practice rooms, cramming for midterms and working feverishly to finish projects. Hell, Will should be doing that, too. But he's barely seen Mike since Saturday, they've both been so busy, and he's not about to pass up an opportunity to eat lunch with him.

Soon, other Party members will trickle in to join them, here at their usual table in the corner by the window. But for now it's just them, sitting across from each other with their shoes just barely touching under the table.

A wet slush falls outside, dark and gray, and Mike turns to watch it as he finishes his bite and takes a preparatory half-breath. The dark sky and the cold air remind Will just a little too much of somewhere he'd rather not think about, but the school building is positively cheery by comparison - especially spangled with paper cutouts of snowmen and Christmas trees and reindeer.

Mike shrugs. "I'm not really that spiritual." Will thinks that's it, and he just shrugs back and waits for Mike's next question, but Mike goes on. "But I guess if I *had* to describe an afterlife - not like a heaven or hell or purgatory or anything, just an *after* - I think it'd be a train."

Will listens, a little awed, as Mike goes on to describe it. Maybe you'd start at the station, Mike says, or the stop - something as mundane as one of those train stops in Chicago, like he saw when his family visited Nancy at college. Elevated a level above the streets, utterly plain and pedestrian, yet painted with a sort of grungy beauty, especially in certain lights. You'd be the only person on the platform. A train pulls up, in the soft blue, pink and purple twilight. The doors open. You can choose to step on, or to wait.

If the afterlife did exist, he says, he'd picture it as a train ride through the night. You pull away from the station as the sky darkens. The rumble and rhythm of the tracks is as gentle and constant as a heartbeat. Maybe it's raining outside, and the drops blur and obscure the quiet beauty of the passing lights.

They differ on what type of train it would be. Will thinks it would look like the big-city type of train, not much more than an aboveground subway or glorified bus. The type with poles to keep your balance and sideways-facing plastic seats. Mike thinks it would be fancier - a more old-fashioned locomotive, larger and wood-paneled inside, where you could wander from car to car. There would be other passengers on board here and there. People mostly keep to themselves.

The rails purr rhythmically through the body of the train. The rain drums on the windows, softly. Night lights slide by, glimmering and multicolored, outside. You can sit and think in the gentle quiet and motion.

Eventually, the train pulls into a station. You can choose to get off, or you can wait.

The image sticks in Will's mind for long weeks afterwards, even when midterms are upon him and then Christmas comes and goes. Maybe it's just the unexpectedness that hit him. It's so completely different, so entirely removed from the usual images of pearly gates or fiery

pits or idyllic utopias full of everyone you've ever loved. Or maybe it's that it's so *Mike*. Mike has always been a train kid, the same way some kids are dinosaur kids or horse kids growing up. Will can still picture the exact pattern of the train-themed wrapping paper Karen Wheeler bought to wrap up Mike's eighth birthday presents. It makes perfect sense that he would picture a life after death as a tranquil ride on the tracks.

But it's more than that. It's the quiet peace of the idea that surprised Will. Mike can be so bombastic, so unapologetically full of life, that Will expected something with more punch and pizzazz - something like the grand finales of their campaigns, perhaps, with applause and fireworks and maybe a highlights reel running in the background. Some big party where Grandma Wheeler and Gandalf are hanging out in the corner, and Frank Herbert perches miserably in a rickety dunk tank. But instead, it's this calm, gentle thing. Contemplative and bittersweet. Strangely beautiful. It struck a chord in Will so deep that, thinking about it days later, he's surprised to find his nose prickling like he's about to tear up.

He badly wants to draw it, and starts several times, but he always crumples it up or erases it before he gets too far. It feels disrespectful, somehow, to take Mike's afterlife into his own hands like that, like sacrilege.

Mike's demeanor was casual as he said it all, but in a very careful, measured way. Like the nonchalance was a front. Like maybe the imagery meant more to him than he let on.

And maybe he's just in love and being melodramatic, but Will can't shake the feeling that he just got a small glimpse into Mike's soul.

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"Could you get my shoulders, please?"

Will is rolling his neck when Mike turns to look, like he's trying to pop it. He stops when he sees Mike watching, rubbing at his neck with a wince.

"Yeah, sure."

*Get*, in this case, means *massage*, and Mike stands, stretches with a groan, and ambles across the Byers' living room to settle himself in the space Will created behind him. They sit sideways on the couch, Will bracketed by Mike's legs as Mike takes over the Sisyphean task of rubbing the knots from his partner's neck and shoulders. Will is always so tense during the coldest months of the year. Jumpy and agitated as a street cat. The anxiety winds all his muscles up tight, giving him knots in his back and random aches in his stomach and near-daily headaches that come as a result of grinding his teeth in his sleep.

Mike wishes he could do more. He wishes he could snap his fingers and change the past, change what happened to Will when they were kids. But he can't. As it is, all he can do is to try to be patient with Will's general irritability, nudge him awake when he starts jerking in his sleep, and rub the knots from his shoulders.

At least they're over the hump, now. November and December are generally the worst months. January isn't much fun, either, but after that the days get steadily longer again and the weather begins to mellow out. And it's almost January; tomorrow is New Year's Eve.

New Year's Eve. Jesus. Mike feels like he just barely got used to writing 1988 on the top of his papers. Now he's gonna be writing 88 89 on all his assignments for the next two and a half months.

His hands slow for a moment as he tries to work at the steel of Will's shoulders without causing actual pain. Will, who has leaned forward over his book to give Mike optimal access, glances over shoulder with an interrogative hum.

Mike continues his work. "Nothing. Just can't believe it's gonna be January already."

"Shit, I know. Is this what being an adult is gonna be like? Months feel like weeks all the sudden?"

"Based on how often my parents complain about it, probably."

But it's not just that. It's also the fact that if it's almost January, then they must have been in this arrangement of theirs for a solid two and



a half months.

Mike can't tell if it should have felt much longer, or much shorter.

Should things be more... different? Or *are* they different, and he's just used to it now?

The asking was first. The yes-no system. They still do that, just not as often as when they started. That was the first big difference And from that stemmed the touchy-feely stuff. More hugs than before. Longer hugs. Hugs that would have raised eyebrows before, would raise eyebrows now if anyone saw. Hugs where they fold into each other and *stay* there; not just a brusque squeeze and pat on the back, but an embrace. Settling in to feel the other's warmth and heartbeat, Mike's nose tucked into Will's hair and Will's (cold) nose burying itself in Mike's neck. Eyes closing, arms wrapped around each other for thirty seconds or a minute or more. Hugs that, Mike *swears*, noticeably lower his blood pressure and improve his mood. He doesn't know how Will does it. Maybe everybody was onto something with this *couples live longer* thing.

They cuddle sometimes, too, which is really just Mike's not-so-sneaky way of scoring himself an hour-long hug on the couch. Will has learned that if he can get Mike to lie down on him, and runs his fingers through his hair, Mike is usually out cold within fifteen minutes no matter what time of the day it is. Will has used this power for evil several times already.

They hold hands, sometimes, when no one else is around.

And then, of course, there's the makeout sessions. Those, more than anything else, make Mike's *red alert* signals go haywire, although it's easier all the time. He still feels those signals every time he gets just a little too into one of their sessions, or when he can't quite stop himself from picturing Will when he reaches into his pajama pants at night, or when Will gets so excited about something that he grabs Mike's hand and squeezes, like he's trying to channel serotonin to Mike through the skin of their palms. When Mike surrenders himself just a little too completely, or when his thoughts stray just a little too far into the gutter, or when his heart beats just a little too hard and too ardently for his best friend, the *red alert* signals start flashing and

beeping in the back of his mind. *Stop. Be careful. That's wrong. This is wrong. You're not supposed to be doing this, not supposed to be feeling this with another guy. This isn't allowed and you know it.*

It's easy to ignore them, by now.

He's starting to worry that it's getting a little *too* easy. But, well, his brain is just confused. Will is pretty - not pretty like a girl, but pretty nonetheless, and handsome if you look for it, and of *course* Mike's brain would start mixing up signals and crossing wires, with Mike cuddled up to Will and kissing him all the time. It's easy because he's used to it now, that's all.

Except, that doesn't quite work, does it? Because he's decidedly *not* used to it. It's still all so new, so alien, so adrenaline-inducing. It all still feels like a dream sometimes. But -

Whatever. It doesn't matter.

Like he said. Touchy-feely stuff. That was the first change.

The second was soon to follow: the sharing. They split things now. Whatever they have. Money, food, study material. Earlier this week, Mike found himself digging into Will's dresser, borrowing a shirt without bothering to ask. It's something he never would have done before, but... *what's mine is yours*, and all that.

Will starts rolling his shoulders under Mike's touch, pushing back against his hands with a groan, and Mike chuckles. "Better?"

"Well, don't *stop*. "

"I'm not, I'm not."

Mike hesitates when the compulsion hits him, decides it doesn't matter, and leans forward to drop a kiss on the back of Will's neck before continuing.

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The fight wasn't the bad part.

Well, the fight was bad - it was a fairly big one, as their spats go - but

it was what came after that made it noteworthy.

It was a fairly typical squabble. They were both in a sour mood anyway, for their own respective reasons, and Mike ended up snapping something that toed the line of passive-aggressive into plain-old-aggressive. Will, annoyed already and now hurt, snapped back. It was all downhill from there. Unfair and insensitive things were said on both sides. Voices were raised. Old disagreements were dragged out of the archives as extra ammunition. Feelings were bruised, at least two and a half dramatic exits were made, and both of them spent the rest of the day licking their wounds and pointedly avoiding each other.

It was not an atypical fight. In fact, barring the smallest of details, they've probably already gone through that *particular* fight at least half a dozen times since they met. It was hurtful, yeah, and it's stressful to be in the interim between argument and resolution. But they both know they'll make up within the next day or two, just like always. This is how it always goes. They fight, and if it's big enough not to be resolved in one go, they skulk away to mope for a day or two, and then they meet back up - resentfully, sometimes - and have the same fight again, this time more calmly and with fewer harsh words and accusations, and they reach some sort of resolution. Apologies are made, peace offerings exchanged, and within a couple hours they're back to normal. They both know this isn't anything *serious*.

At least, Mike thought they did.

Because what makes this fight different is Will, on Mike's radio, on *their* channel, not two hours after they stormed away from each other.

He sounds desperate, and Mike groans. This is *so* not a good time for Will to have an episode. Mike is not in the mood to be nice to him right now. But, fight or no fight, he's not gonna leave Will to go through it alone.

He rolls across his bed, hangs his upper body upside-down off the mattress, and grabs his radio from the floor.

He tries not to sound resentful as he answers Will's increasingly stressed calls. "Mike here. Are you okay? Over."

"Can you come back over here? Over."

Mike pauses for just a second, sitting upright to lick his lips. He winces at the head rush. "Are you okay?" He almost forgets to add, "Over."

This time, it's Will that hesitates. When he does answer, his voice sounds a tad thicker - like his throat is swelling up. "Just please come back over here. Please. Over."

Mike lets out a deep sigh, dropping his forehead against the hard plastic of the radio. This is absolutely not ideal timing. "Fine. Be there soon. Over and out."

Shit.

He rolls off his bed and heads for the door, yelling to let his family know where he's going. It's cold and wet outside, to top everything off - maybe that's why Will is having an episode, maybe it's the weather - and the last thing he wants to do right now is pull on his jacket, hop on his bike and ride across town through the damp, cutting wind to comfort someone he's still mad at.

Maybe this will put their reconciliation phase on fast-forward, though, if it forces them to spend time together again. Maybe this'll be over by tonight instead of tomorrow or the next day or the next.

When Mike gets to the Byers' house he hides his bike behind a shed and knocks on Will's window. He doesn't want to deal with the awkwardness of saying hi to Will's family again mere hours after he clearly stormed out. He's used to the window routine by now, anyway. This is how he comes in when one of them can't sleep and he arrives past normal visiting hours. His hair and jacket are damp, and he's still grumpy, but Will's pale face in the window softens the rough edges of his mood.

The window squeaks open. Mike hoists himself up, ducking his head and rolling into the room with a motion that's becoming smooth and

practiced. He nearly sliced his scalp open on the window frame the first few times he did this. Now he just sighs and takes off his jacket to hang on the back of Will's desk chair as Will closes the window again and stuffs a towel from his hamper into the crack below the door, to block some of the noise. As long as they don't yell they shouldn't alert Joyce or Jonathan.

Will's nose is tinged a little pink, as is the flesh around his eyes, and Mike stands with his hands in his pockets. Waiting, without touching. He knows how twitchy Will is about touch when he gets like this. But to Mike's surprise, Will drifts towards him, arms opening loosely in a meek and wordless request for a hug.

*That's weird*, Mike thinks, and he opens his own arms without moving forward, just in case he misinterpreted. But Will ducks into them with his head down, and Mike pats him absently on the back as he tries to figure out what the hell is up. Will isn't breathing too fast and too hard, he's not pacing endlessly or curled up in a tight ball or lost in time, lungs heaving in sobs as he tries desperately and repeatedly to tell Mike *Don't trust me, don't trust me, it's him, it's not me, it's him, I'm a spy, don't trust me, it's not me, I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry*.

But if this isn't an episode, then what? It's very unlike Will, proud and begrudging creature that he is, to seek out forgiveness this soon after a fight. A small episode, then? One that's presenting atypically?

And then Will starts saying, "I'm sorry," into Mike's shoulder, and then again, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," as they disengage from the hug, and Mike thinks he understands. It's one of *those*. One of the episodes where Will's years-old desperation to be heard rises to the surface, born anew like a zombie from a grave, everything he couldn't say once now spewing forth uncontrollably. *He made me do it, and It's him, he's talking through me, he's using me, it's not me*, and, during the worst and darkest episodes, *Kill me. He's gonna make me hurt you, please, I don't want to, just kill me before he -*

Mike braces himself, readying his arsenal of grounding facts and calming phrases, wondering - as he always wonders - if he's enough, if he's cut out for this, if someone else should be handling this. What if he just does more harm than good?

"It's okay," he murmurs, offering an arm again in case that's what Will needs, but Will wanders away this time and stands by the foot of his bed to scrub his hands over his face.

But he doesn't start talking about the Mind Flayer like they're thirteen again. Instead, he takes a deep breath, links his hands nervously in front of him so he can fidget with his own fingers, and starts in on a hiccupping spiel about their fight. "Look, I. I was an ass about the whole movie thing, and I'm sorry. It wasn't even that important, I was just mad already because of the shitty week, and then you -" He takes a little breath, seeming to re-center himself. "And then I overreacted to you kind of snapping at me, and I know you had a shitty week too so it wasn't really -"

Mike has been trying to get a word in edgewise, and now he has to interrupt a few times to slow what sounds like a practiced script. "Hey. Hey. Will. Hey. Stop."

He's ducking his head, trying to surreptitiously check Will's eyes. He doesn't *think* they look glazed and distant, unfocused like they get sometimes during an episode. But then... What the hell is this?

Will pauses, expression at once nervous and guarded, and Mike finds himself at a loss. He doesn't think this is an episode. *Think* being the operative word, because he has no fucking clue what else this could be. It sounds like Will is trying to make up already, in what must be record time for them, but this is... This isn't normal. He never comes in with an apology like this, taking the blame onto his own shoulders like he's just trying to get it all done with as soon as possible. That's not how they do things. They talk things out - usually by way of rehashing the argument, this time with a little more maturity, until they come to some sort of agreement. Having one person groveling and relenting, just to get it over with and get back to smooth waters... that doesn't solve shit. And it's beyond disconcerting to see Will do it. Mostly because Mike doesn't think he's ever done it before.

Normally Mike might take the bait and jump back into their disagreement, starting in on Take Two as usual, but this is too weird. This isn't right. Something's up. Something's wrong, and he can tell.

The best strategy he can think of is to just skip to the end. "You

know, I started it. I shouldn't have been sarcastic about the -" He waves a hand. He honestly can't even remember why they started fighting, at this point. "The college stuff. That was just stupid. I was, I mean. It was stupid of me. It was uncalled for."

He sits on the bed, hoping that by taking the blame out of Will's hands he can stop... whatever this is.

But instead of being reassured, Will starts to rock in place.

Fantastic.

"You were right though," he's saying, clasping one elbow in the opposite palm as he lifts the other hand to chew on a hangnail. "I shouldn't bitch about it so much if I'm not actually gonna do anything about it. It's my own stupid responsibility and all that, and I shouldn't have made it a big deal. You were just trying to help, I shouldn't have blown up at you."

Mike stares at him for a few beats, thoroughly weirded out. Then he nods, says, "Okay," slaps his palms on his knees, and stands. "What's going on?"

Will frowns. Then he seems to realize what he's doing and gets the hangnail out from between his teeth. "What?"

"I mean, what's going on? What are you doing? This is super weird, and you know it is. You never apologize like this. I thought you were having an episode, but it's just - you're just - what the hell is going on?"

Will looks down, like he's guilty. And then Mike sees moisture glittering in his eyes.

Okay. So there is something more going on. And it's something that stings, if Will's struggle for stoicism is anything to go by.

Mike debates, then holds out a hand, waiting until Will relents and lets himself be pulled gently to the bed. Only once they're both settled again, and Will has had a chance to wrestle down the waterworks, does Mike say, "Are you gonna tell me what this is really about? Or do I have to guess?"

There's a long pause.

"Okay. I'll guess. Uh..." Mike puffs out his cheeks. "Your alien brethren have finally contacted you and it's time for you to return to your home planet."

Will smacks him, but it's a gentle smack, and Mike thinks he spies the tiniest of smiles before Will smothers it.

"No? Okay, then, you've been bitten by a radioactive spider and you're not ready for the responsibility of being Spiderman."

This time Will locks eyes with him. "Baby, I was born ready."

It's so unexpected that Mike barks out a laugh, which makes Will laugh a little too. As they both subside, Mike slides a careful arm around Will's shoulders, and Will leans into it.

"C'mon," he nudges, "Don't make me guess again."

And Will, finally, sets his jaw and crosses his arms and says, "Are you gonna break up with me?"

The phrasing hits Mike before the meaning. *Break up*, as in, breaking up with a boyfriend. Like they're dating. Which isn't *totally* inaccurate, he supposes, but it still makes him squirm a little.

And then he registers what Will actually means, and he blinks. "Huh?" He tries to look at Will, but Will still has his head down, avoiding eye contact. Mike hates when he does that. So much of Will's expressiveness comes through his eyes. Without that it's so hard to tell what he's thinking. "No. What?"

Still no answer. Mike is getting antsy again.

"Hey. No. I wasn't gonna - uh, split up with you. Did you think I was?"

Nothing. Then Will gives a limp shrug.

In Willspeak, that means, *Yeah, asshole, I fucking did.*



Mike shakes head - not that Will probably sees it, since he's still hiding his face. "Wait, why?"

Shrug.

"Because of the fight?"

Shrug.

Mike grits his teeth, trying not to get annoyed again. He *really* hates when Will shuts down like this, but getting aggravated with him won't make him communicate any better.

"Look," he says, and he's trying, he really is, but a little bit of impatience slips into his tone anyway. "I wasn't even that mad. Okay? I'm sorry I was a dick. But I'm not gonna - I'm not gonna - you know, call it off just because of that."

Will finally breaks. His head jerks up. "Well, I never fucking know, do I?"

*There we go*, Mike thinks, *Now we're getting somewhere*. And then he does a double take and thinks, *Wait, what?*

Aloud, he says again, "Wait. What? What do you mean?"

Will seems to debate - and then he commits to it, gearing up with a red flush in his neck and cheeks. "I mean, I never know if you're about to take off. Any moment, you could just -" He snaps his fingers - but he does it in front of his own torso, not right under Mike's nose, so Mike can tell he's not trying to lure them into another yelling match. "And I just -" His voice breaks and he glowers at himself, pushing through, but the wobble in his words just grows stronger. "I've been - I'm trying to be -" At last he gives up, burying his face in his hands for the last of it as his throat audibly constricts again. "I'm trying to be good enough for you? But I never -"

"God, Will, no." Mike reaches for him, but Will remains a statue, unresponsive to the touch.

"I never know if -"

The words close off on themselves, like he had to stop talking or risk a sob, and at last he allows Mike to pull him into a hug.

For a minute or two Mike can't find his own voice. He's the guilty one, now. He's been very carefully noncommittal, especially in phrasing. He never says things like "We should do that for *our* apartment," or "When we go to college together," or "In a few years we could..."

He's always very neutral when making statements about the future. Always so careful not to imply they'll be together for it. He doesn't want to give Will the impression that this is something permanent, just in case he decides he has to leave the arrangement. He doesn't want to lead Will on, in a way.

But maybe hedging his bets so thoroughly has just made Will feel like shit. Like Mike is just waiting for some excuse to ditch him and take off into the sunset. Maybe Will doesn't know that Mike actually wants this, wants *them*.

"You don't have to... to *earn* me or some shit," he mutters at last. "Okay? That's not how that works. Dumbass."

He was hoping the jab would make Will laugh, but Will just takes an uneven breath and turns to press his face a little harder against Mike's shirt.

Fuck.

Mike doesn't know if he realized, before, just how much this meant to Will. It obviously meant a fair deal, if he was willing to out himself and lay his entire heart out on the table like he did, risking all to offer this, but... It never really hit Mike exactly how much risk and emotional investment and *meaning* that actually was.

And maybe Will has no idea how much it means to Mike, either. Maybe that's Mike's fault. Maybe he's said it in too many words and too few actions. Maybe his words of affirmation have been too few and far between, or maybe they just sound like empty promises when Mike constantly has one foot out the door.

Well. That changes now.

They talk, voices low, as they move. Will mops himself up with some tissues, and then they sneak Mike to the Byers' bathroom so they can brush their teeth and wash up for bed. It's not that late, yet, but they've had an emotionally taxing day, and if they wait much longer Jonathan will be in the shower for the next forty five minutes. He's been taking showers of ridiculous length, with his return to college (and shitty, lukewarm showers) creeping up on him.

Mike changes into the pajamas he stowed away in Will's dresser for events such as this, and they finish the conversation. This time, Will follows the usual patterns, going back to air his grievances from the fight. Mike follows suit. They talk it through. They argue again, more fairly this time. And this, at last, feels normal.

They're in bed, winding down from the day by cuddling, when Mike has the compulsion to say it again. He just can't shake the fear that Will doesn't know, or doesn't believe him.

"Hey," he says gently, and Will twists to look up at him in the semi-darkness. They left one lava lamp on to sleep, as is Will's habit in the darker months. "You know, you... You don't have to be so on edge. Okay? I'm not gonna take off running at the first sign of trouble. I -" It comes up his throat before he even thinks about it, and he swallows it back. But then he reconsiders. Maybe this is the best way to convince him. His voice drops to just above a whisper, but he manages to let it out. "I love you. And I'm not gonna just take off and abandon you for something stupid. Okay?"

Will smiles, shyly but widely into Mike's collar, and comes up red-faced to murmur "I love you too" into a kiss.

Mike is fighting hard against the instinct to water it down or cheapen it somehow with a quick good-natured insult, or even a full cop-out. *I mean, as a friend, you know?* But he doesn't. He doesn't need to, no matter how much his ingrained instincts are gnawing at the back of his brain, telling him that was too much, too, well, gay.

As usual, he pushes them away.

He doesn't need to take it back or soften its meaning. He meant what he said. He didn't say it just to say it, just because it seemed like what he was *supposed* to say. He meant it. He *feels* it. He loves Will, and -

And before he can even finish that train of thought, he finds himself squashing Will to him, squeezing him tightly in an abrupt surge of near-feral affection. Oh, god. Jesus, fuck. He loves Will. He loves this boy. He knew that before, he knew that, he said it when Will first suggested this thing -

*"Do you love me?" "Yes. Fuck, Will, you -"*

- but Mike doesn't think he's ever felt it quite this potently before.

Or maybe he has. Maybe it's just that he's paying attention now.

It's like a spear, like a physical thing in his chest, and he wraps Will up in his limbs and just breathes through the aching beat of his thundering pulse. This is Mike's person - this brave, gentle, feisty, brilliant, creative, inquisitive, capable and quick-witted and kind being in his arms. This is his person. His partner.

And Mike has the unexpected urge to *show* him that, to make sure he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt how valued he is.

So he crushes Will to him, and nuzzles their cheeks and noses together until Will laughs, and says it again with his heart pounding and soaring at once - "I love you."

He loves Will, whether that's in the way that someone loves their best friend or the way they love their - he shies away from the word *boyfriend* and lands, awkwardly, on *significant other* instead - or the way that they love their family or their home or their partner in crime. He loves him... somehow, in some way. He doesn't know what way. He thought he did, he thought he knew that it was just deep, pure platonic love, platonic devotion, but he's not so sure anymore. And he can't quite unravel that right now, it's too daunting to even consider, mostly because it shouldn't be difficult at all. But it is. And that... that opens up a whole can of worms.

This shouldn't be confusing. Mike shouldn't have any doubts as to the nature of this, this, this thing he has with Will, this love he has *for* Will. And he thought he knew. But the more time that goes by, the more he's starting to realize that this feels real. It feels - *he* feels the way that he thought he only would with a girlfriend. Or wife. Or...

Boyfriend.

His cheeks are burning so hot he could probably cook an egg on his face. Part of him is confused, panicked, twisting and jerking to get away like a rabbit in a trap. Because this is wrong. It has to be wrong. This isn't supposed to feel *real*. He's not supposed to feel like Will is really his - boyfriend. But now that he's paying attention to it, he can't get it out of his brain. Like learning a new word and then seeing it everywhere, or like staring at a bright light and then seeing its color-negative ghost drifting behind your eyelids with every blink.

And here's the kicker. He doesn't think anything has actually changed. At least, not inside of him. He was monitoring himself so closely, being so careful. He never really felt a change in himself. More importantly, he never really felt a change in how he feels about his best friend.

But those two things can't coexist. He can't accidentally have real feelings in this arrangement, *and* be the same as ever.

So what the actual fuck.

He shakes his head, trying to pull himself from his own mind. That's not something he's going to think about right now. Not now, when descending into a spiral of thoughts would ruin this. Not now that Will is humming contentedly at the crush of affectionate pressure Mike is exerting on him, not even the least bit uncomfortable or disconcerted despite how hard it probably is to breathe.

So when Mike loosens his grip - regretfully, a small part of him wishing he could just loosen some screws in Will's ribcage and curl up inside - he pushes those thoughts away. He can't deal with that right now. He won't. He won't let it ruin this moment, not when Will's cheeks are a happy pink and Mike still has that warm spear

between his ribs, slowly ripping him open thread by thread in a way that somehow doesn't hurt.

Will gets a mischievous glint in his eye, and before Mike can furrow his brows in suspicion, he's already diving down quick as a flash to yank Mike's shirt up and blow a raspberry against his side. And just like that, Mike's quandary is pushed to the back of his mind - though not forgotten.

"No!" Mike yelps, jolting like he's been electrocuted as his body laughs without his consent. "Bastard! I *hate* that. You *know* I hate that \_"

But he gets the feeling that forcing the words out through gasps of laughter rather dulls their impact.

He writhes and kicks, trying to shove Will off, but he's unnaturally weak with laughter and it's all too easy for Will to nab both his wrists and pin them both in place with one hand. So Mike resorts to more kicking, reverting to kangaroo mode, and then squeaks in a very undignified way as Will decides to stop tickling him and lick a hot, wet stripe up his side instead.

"Ugh!" he gasps, finally wrenching one hand loose and pushing Will's head away. "Will! Gross!"

But a different kind of jolt goes through him then, too. It's something about Will's weight settled comfortably over him, Will's hand pinning his wrists above his head, Will's tongue slick and soft and ember-hot against his skin. If Will had aimed a couple inches higher and slightly more towards center, rucking Mike's shirt up a bit further, his tongue would have run over one of Mike's nipples. Something buckles in the pit of his stomach and Mike laughs again, this time uncomfortably, and successfully wriggles out from under Will before anything embarrassing can happen.

And then he's remembering a time that it happened already. Except, that time, it was Will. Lips swollen from kissing and hair messy from Mike's hands, Will once rolled his hips against Mike's in the empty kitchen of the Wheeler house. He pulled away immediately, folding in on himself like he was mortified beyond belief, and he refused to

meet Mike's eye for a while after that.

They haven't mentioned it since, but Mike remembers what it felt like. Even through his jeans, even for that brief moment, Mike could tell Will was hard in his pants. He thought it would be off-putting. And it was... weird, definitely. *Unexpected* may not be the right word. Will is a guy, after all. Mike is somewhat familiar with how guys work, being one himself.

But.

Weird.

Just not as weird as it should have been. He felt like he *should* have been recoiling, or even gagging. Mike is straight. No matter how comfortable he is with Will, usually, he doesn't exactly have any interest in dicks. Of course he doesn't. But he wasn't exactly lying when he told Will he didn't mind, either. It wasn't gross or anything, even though he felt like maybe it should have been. If anything, it was... intriguing. Mike had a split-second compulsion to say, *Wait, come back, do that again. Let me feel that again. I've never felt that before. Let me study that feeling until I figure it out.*

And in terms of pure physical sensation, well, a body is a body. Pressure is pressure, friction is friction. And, Mike supposes, instinct doesn't give much of a fuck who or what is pressing against you, it just wants you to press back. And... it did feel good. And Mike knows, instinctually, that if he could get out of his head and not think about it too much, it would feel *really* fucking good to do that again, on purpose this time.

The thought enters his head unbidden.

Maybe, if he lies back down and pulls Will back on top of him, they *could* do that. Right here. Right *now*.

His heart gives a hard squeeze in his chest, a kind of backwards flop, and then starts racing again.

Will *did* mention sex, at the beginning of all this. Does that mean it's something *he* wants, or is it something he thought *Mike* would want?

Mike hesitates, undecided, stomach in knots. The possibility of rejection is terrifying, but the possibility of getting off - with a *partner*, not just alone with his own fantasies - is so enticing it might just override the fear.

The loud, pointed voice of Joyce Byers snaps Mike out of the moment like a bucket of cold water over his head. She's muffled by the door, but it's still clear as crystal when she says, "Good night, boys. I'm heading to bed."

Meaning: *Please shut up, I want to sleep.*

There's a moment of quiet, and then Will calls out, "Good night, Mom."

"Night," Mike says, because it would probably be weirder if he didn't respond, now that she knows he's here.

They listen to her footsteps retreat down the hallway, and then they look at each other and bury giggles in their hands and arms.

"Busted," Mike whispers, and Will hisses back, "Whose fault is that?"

"Yours! You tickled me!"

"Quietly! You're the one that started shrieking -"

"I was not shrieking, I was -"

A door closes down the hallway and they both fall silent out of habit, even though there's no real point in hiding anymore.

"Your fault," Mike whispers after a moment, and Will scoffs, tugging up the blankets around them.

"Whatever."

Mike doesn't sleep much that night. He can't blame his sleeping arrangements. He's perfectly warm, with Will's profusion of quilts and blankets stacked heavily over them, and he's perfectly comfortable being the big spoon, one arm draped over Will's waist. Will gropes around for Mike's hand in his sleep, about an hour into



the night, and Mike opens his palm to let their fingers interlace. Will tugs their hands up to use as a chin rest, then settles again and goes still.

He could blame insomnia. It can be a challenge, sometimes. But he knows it's not that.

It's just him. Him, and his thoughts, and the fact that he just can't puzzle out that contradiction that can't possibly be true.

He's awake until at least 2:30am, maybe later. But then he blinks, realizing all at once that it's morning and so he must have slept eventually. Will is a warm, heavy weight on his shoulder, turning his arm completely numb and breathing stale breath in Mike's face. Mike checks the clock, pulls Will a little closer, and goes promptly back to sleep.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I was gonna work on other stories. Apparently I'm just gonna work on this one ͡\\_(\ツ)/͡~  
As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts!

## 6. Thicker Than Water

### Notes for the Chapter:

Content warning: sexual content and very brief self harm mention

February 1989

It's not a total surprise to see the cleric and the paladin making out in the Wheelers' basement. They're not nearly as subtle as they think they are.

Still, it gives Max a moment of pause as she rounds the corner - a guilty little start, like she's the one that's been caught doing something she's not supposed to instead of them. She expects her silhouette, her presence, to startle them - but apparently either she's a ninja or they're oblivious, or both, because they just keep kissing. And for a moment, she just watches.

Mike's arms are looped around Will's neck, and Will's hands are on Mike's waist, and as Max watches they realign their heads and press into another kiss without opening their eyes. She should be moving already, tiptoeing back to the stairs. That's how she got down here without alerting them in the first place; she was sneaking, with the intent to jump out and scare them. She could, most likely, sneak back the way she came without incident. But now she's paralyzed with the irrational fear that they'll hear her if she moves, and this will all become a mess very quickly.

And, okay, maybe there's some curiosity there too. This kind of thing was more prevalent in California, sure - or, maybe just more visible - but she's rarely been this close to such an unguarded moment. Their expressions are calm, contented, and a petty little sting of jealousy bites into her chest. Max dated Lucas in middle school and Cody Alvarez in sophomore year, but she kind of gave up on dating after that.

At least, she gave up on dating guys.

And there aren't a whole lot of other options in Hawkins.

Mike presses Will back against the wall, using his interlaced fingers to cushion Will's head, and Max takes one more furtive glance at their meshed lips before creeping backwards towards the stairs.

Part of her wants to stay. Not that she wants to get in on the action or anything, she's not into that. But they're the same kind of abnormal that she is, and as much as she loves the knucklehead losers in the Party - her little found family - not all of them would be able to relate to some of her woes.

Will and Mike might.

But she keeps climbing, and she shrugs when Karen Wheeler asks where the boys are, and she zips her lips.

When Mike and Will reappear, several minutes later, Max feels the rest of the Party not *quite* glance at each other. They all suspect, she thinks. Of course, nobody has ever said anything. And Lucas may truly be in the dark; he can be clueless that way. But when the Party wakes up after a sleepover and Will is still curled up in Mike's sleeping bag, or when somebody walks into the room and they quickly scoot a little farther apart on the couch, or when they lag behind the rest of the Party and disappear, only to reappear a minute later acting a little too casual... Nobody points it out. It's like an unspoken rule, the same way they travel in packs after dark so that nobody has to walk home alone at night, the same way they never use the Mind Flayer monster in D&D even though it looks nothing like the real thing, the same way they don't complain about having to clean up the messes left by El's occasional meltdowns. It's just how things are.

How they've always been, really.

Max wonders, chewing on the Twizzlers Mike shares with everyone as they gather in the Wheelers' living room to wait for dinner. She wonders how long it's been. At least a year or two, definitely. They've been getting sloppy lately, clueing the Party in with their relative carelessness. But she gets the feeling it's been longer than that. Hell, maybe even always. Maybe they were kind of a *thing* when she first

got to Hawkins. But wait, no - El. El happened, which means Mike and Will couldn't have happened until at least Freshman year.

But she even remembers wondering about it, that first year. That first fall. Pretty soon she had bigger fish to fry - secrets and monsters and an unbelievable story that turned out to be true, government labs and her asshole brother - but that night on Halloween, she wondered. They seemed close. They always seemed close. A little closer than normal, maybe, always standing so close their shoulders touched, always bending their heads together to whisper to each other, always attached at the hip. Even other kids at school said it - about Will, at least. They hadn't seemed to notice Mike much, except to mutter snide things about his appearance or lack of athletic skill. Will, though... Well, Max earned her very first detention at Hawkins Middle by punching a boy in the eye for calling Will something that started with F.

She doesn't think Will knows about that. She never really brought it up. They weren't super close, at that point. It would have been weird to tell him. But Max couldn't just turn a blind eye and ignore it like everyone else. She considered Will a friend - not a close friend, but a friend. He was sweet and quiet and gentle, and he was nice to her. And Max knew what it was like to be bullied.

Max hates bullies.

Lucas and Dustin bicker about something. El steals the rest of Max's Twizzler and lures her into a conversation about some dumb show they've both been watching. (Max isn't super into it, but El loves those sappy shows, and Max can stomach it to make her friend happy.) Will gets into the middle of the ongoing argument, playing devil's advocate for both Lucas and Dustin, and Mike scribbles away at campaign plans on the other side of the couch, piping up occasionally with a point of his own.

And every once in a while, Mike looks up and makes eye contact with Will, and they say something to each other in that wordless way of theirs.

Max could use somebody in her corner. Somebody who gets it. Somebody who knows what it's like.

She glances around to see if anyone else notices. And she eats her Twizzlers. And she plans.

---

It's an unremarkable Tuesday when something unprecedented happens.

Max shows up to Will's house, uninvited and unaccompanied, and invites herself in.

Max has been over before, of course. And she's even been over on her own, without the rest of the Party - just her and Will, hanging out. But it's exceedingly rare. And they always make plans first, on the rare occasion that they do hang out alone. It's never spur of the moment.

Except, apparently, it is now.

Max has her thumbs hooked under the straps of her backpack, and she bounces a little on the toes of her Converse as Will shuts the door behind her. A nervous energy hangs around her, like a force field, practically whipping up her hair in its currents. She's all fidgety fingers and tense limbs, and Will can't even ask *Are you okay?* before she says, "Is your mom home?"

She drops her board and the floor and gives it a little kick, sending it rolling off into a corner.

Will can feel a frown already forming between his brows. This can't be good. He tries to smooth it out and act casual. "Nuh-uh."

She glances at the hallway. "Is Mike here?"

The frown struggles to re-form. "No."

Chester, meanwhile, hears her voice and starts baying from another room, his heavy footsteps announcing his presence full seconds before he comes galumphing in at top speed. Max's mood shifts on a dime as she greets him, letting him put his paws on her shoulders even though he's not supposed to jump on people.

"Hi, buddy!" She grabs his doggy face and blows on his nose, making

him snort and try to lick her chin. "Hi! Hey, Chester! Are you a good boy? Yeah? Yes. You are."

"Ches." Will drags the mass of fur gently off of her, redirecting him to the floor. "Down. C'mon, no jumping. You know that. There you go. Good boy."

Chester flops heavily onto his side, paws in the air and ears splaying comically as he begs for a belly rub.

"What a goof," she says affectionately, and Will kneels to provide the requested pats.

"He's just hamming it up because he knows you like him."

"He's right."

The small talk is just a filler, and they both know it. There's something else in the air, some elephant in the room, and it looms closer as Max doffs her bag and begins to pace. She wanders to the couch, sits, stands, and paces back with her fingers laced behind her head. Will watches her with mounting dread.

"Something up?"

It's a rhetorical question. She wouldn't be here like this if something wasn't up.

"No." She reaches the end of the room and returns to the couch. "Yes. No."

With a frustrated sigh, she sits. This time she stays there, and Will gets up to follow. Chester hefts himself upright and stays on Will's heels, settling at his feet with a sigh of his own when Will takes the armchair.

Worst case scenarios swell and loom in his mind. Scenarios with cold-blooded lizard dogs and humanoid creatures with heads that split open into multi-junctioned maws. Colossal shadowy presences, watching, waiting, killing, spreading. Vague yet menacing government agencies with the power to disappear people completely, and -

Mike.

Where's Mike?

Will hasn't seen him since sixth period at school, and how long has it been since then? Four hours? More? Enough time for an unmarked van to scoop him up off the streets, never to be seen again, kidnapped or tortured or worse for what he's seen, what he knows, and in a few days a body full of cotton stuffing might show up in a ditch somewhere and Mrs. Wheeler will start arranging a funeral and no one's gonna know that Mike is alive and needs help and -

Max starts to say, "Guh, sorry, I know I'm being a total weirdo, I just -" at the same time that Will blurts, "Is it the lab? Is it Brenner? Where's El, is she -"

Then, in the same beat, they both look at each other and say, "What?"

"You go."

"No, no, you."

"No, *you go.* "

"Just say what you were gonna -"

"*Will.* "

Will gives it a second, just to make sure they're not gonna talk over each other again, and then says, "Is it the Upside Down?"

Max's head swivels in his direction. "No," she's quick to say. "No, no. Nothing like that."

Still, he presses. "Everyone's okay? El, Mike? The others?"

This time she shoots him a look that might almost be amused, one side of her mouth starting to curl up. "Your b- Mike's fine. 'S far as I know. I'm not in charge of him." She starts to fold her arms, then seems to reconsider and leans forward to clasp her hands between her knees instead. A curtain of long, fiery hair falls forward,

obscuring her face. "Sorry. Didn't mean to freak you out."

"Sokay."

Will waits. Max takes a half-breath a few times, like she's about to say something, but never does. And then she's up again, pushing herself off the couch to continue pacing. Her breath is audibly short, and she lifts her hands to her head again and looks skyward to balloon her cheeks in a stressed-out groan. "Okay. So. Right. Okay."

Will watches this from the edge of his seat, not overly reassured, before he finally snaps. "Spit it out, Zooms. You're freaking me out."

"I'm getting to it, okay?"

If this was El, Will would offer her his hand to hold, or a hug, or *something*. But Max isn't real touchy-feely, and they aren't as close as he and El are. It would probably just be weird.

Chester must pick up on her distress, because he struggles to his feet and pads over to nose at her hand. She gives him an obligatory pat before making her final return to the couch, throwing herself down with another stressed-out noise. "Okay. I really thought this was gonna be a lot easier. Um. Fuck, okay." Her cornflower blue eyes skip up, meeting Will's for a brief second before she looks down at her hands with another long breath. "So I think I'm probably a lesbian or whatever."

It takes Will a fraction of a second to make sense of the words. And then, in an instant, his head is filled with so many things at once that he couldn't form an intelligent sentence if he tried.

Max doesn't give him a chance to say something appropriately warm and accepting, though, because before he can get his mouth back online she's already talking again.

"I'm only telling you because I saw you and Mike. And it'd be pretty fucking hypocritical if you judged me or something. So."

She shrugs and sits back, crossing her arms over her chest and staring off somewhere out the window with a set jaw and a twitching foot. And somehow, out of everything he could have said, Will manages to



pick something dumb.

“Oh god. Saw me and Mike... doing what?”

“Gross,” she says flatly, without looking at him.

It stings, the implication that he and Mike having an intimate moment would be *gross*, and he bites back a retort. *Didn't you just say something about being hypocritical?*

But she looks guilty immediately, glancing at him to gauge his expression, and he gets the feeling she didn't mean it like it sounded. Her tone is softer when she says, “It was just kissing.”

He should say something smart here, something to make her feel better, because she's obviously massively uncomfortable. But he's too hung up on shock, not to mention reeling at the revelation that he and Mike aren't as secret as he thought, and all he can do is sit in dumb silence.

She launches abruptly into another sentence, like the quiet was getting to her. “Anyway I took a self defense class with my aunt last summer, so if anyone is giving you two a hard time and you need me to beat them up, tell me.”

That finally shakes Will out of his stupor. He gives a wry smile. “Isn't that kind of the opposite of self defense?”

“Not the way I see it.”

He chuckles, hoping she will too, but she's sitting stiff as a board on the couch without making eye contact. He pushes himself up, approaching cautiously. “Hey.”

She finally takes a breath, like she had been holding it for the past few seconds, unfreezing to dash a knuckle under her eyes.

Will hovers awkwardly a few feet away, then half-lifts his arms. “Can I hug you?”

She looks balefully up at him. “If you must.”

But she gets up without hesitating and leans in, wrapping her arms around him and placing her hands a little awkwardly on his back. He cranes his neck, trying to free himself from a sea of hair, and then pats her in what he hopes is a comforting manner. They're not usually this close to each other; Will can smell the medley of shampoos and conditioners and lotions and whatever else she uses. It's not as girly as the stuff El uses - at least, not as flowery-sweet.

"It's okay," he says, because he doesn't know what else to say. He can't exactly scream, *I'm so glad to meet you again!* even though that's kind of what he's thinking.

Shit, he wishes Mike were here. Mike would know what to say. Mike always knows what to say.

Especially because, as soon as he says that, Max gives a little jolt - a suppressed sob, maybe - and curls in on herself.

Shit, shit, shit. He's just making it worse. He doesn't know how to deal with it when girls cry. He never had a sister, at least not before El, and she's only kind of like a sister. Nancy was older than all of them, and Holly is still young enough that her woes are relatively easily solved. He knows how to approach El's tears, but Max? He doesn't think he's ever seen Max cry before, let alone in his arms, let alone after something like *that*.

What would he want to hear? If he was in Max's position. If he had just come out to a friend. What would he want them to say?

Will takes a breath, trying to steady himself, and says again, "It's okay. I'm sorry, I'm really bad at this. I should've said... better things." He gives a little laugh, and she huffs out a laugh in return before sniffing, head still down so that all he can see is red-orange. "But, um... Shit, I dunno. I guess, I'm on your side, and, uh, I... I know how it is. So if you... need... I dunno. You know what I mean."

It's fumbling and insufficient, but it seems to do the trick. Max gives a quick little nod, and then all at once her arms tighten like a vice and she presses her face hard into the crook of his neck and shoulder. He squeezes back.

It's a weird feeling. Like insta-family. For one new sister, just add an open closet.

Her grip loosens and her head lifts, revealing damp eyes and a pink nose, but there's a mischievous smile curling up her lips. "So you two *are* dating."

"Oh." He almost winces out of habit, blood pressure spiking even though this is an ally. Then bashful pride wins out and he reaches up to rub his neck, smiling at the floor as she slips out of his grip. "Yeah."

Dating is kind of a reductive word for it, but the story is perhaps too long to get into now.

Her own smile widens into something gleeful. "I knew it. I mean we all kind of knew it, but -"

"Wait, what?"

"Oh, dude." She blinks, eyes big and round and still a little red. "Everyone knows."

Something cold slices through him. His stomach feels like someone's stirring his guts around with a fork.

"The Party, I mean," she's rushing to amend. "The others. Not *everyone*, like not everyone at school or anything. And actually I don't *know* that they know, it's just like, *I* kind of knew, and I got the feeling that everyone else kind of -"

He puts his hands on her shoulders, cutting her off. "Do not tell Mike that."

"Okay." She gives him a confused frown. "He's, like, sensitive about it?"

Will releases her, drifting a few feet away to run a hand through his hair. "He'd flip. He'd -"

*Leave me, maybe. If it shook him up enough.*

“Sokay, I get it. I mean, I’d rather people don’t know about me, either. I get it. I won’t say anything.”

Will turns, distracted from his worries. “Can I tell Mike?”

“About -?” She makes a vague gesture. “Me?” He nods, and she sticks her hands in her pockets and rocks back on her heels. “Um, you know, I’d rather not. One heart attack is enough for me right now.”

“Okay. Yeah. Sure, no problem.”

There’s a heavy silence, full of all the things they could say. Will wants to ask a million questions. When did she know. *How* did she know. Is she lonely, is she scared, does she have a girlfriend. Did they have the same kinds of experiences as kids. But he gets the feeling this isn’t the right time, and then the moment passes and Max blots at her eyes with the heels of her hands.

“Agh. Okay. That was grossly emotional. Let’s go do something irresponsible. You ever done graffiti art before?”

“Is that allowed?”

“No.” She grins. “I have spray paint in my garage.”

He thinks about it. Then he grins back. “There’s a concrete wall around the old lab.”

Her smile sharpens. “Wicked.”

---

They’re at Mike’s house, hanging out in his room while they wait for dinner to be ready, when Mike brings it up.

“You’ve been hanging out with Max a lot lately.”

It’s a neutral statement, unburdened by accusation or judgement, but it still makes Will’s stomach sink. He doesn’t like keeping secrets from Mike. But Max asked him not to say anything about their conversation, and he’s honoring that. Even though it’s been two weeks and she still shows no signs of giving him the go-ahead to let Mike in on it.

“Yeah, we’ve gotten a little closer actually.”

It’s all Will can really say.

Mike just says, “That’s great,” and goes back to folding laundry. He’s sitting at the head of his bed, working his way through a pile of fresh-from-the-dryer clothes, while Will uses the heap as a toasty-warm nest and generally makes himself a nuisance.

Will emerges a little from the shirts he’s been hoarding and frowns. He can’t decipher Mike’s tone. “You’re not... jealous, are you?”

Mike wrinkles his nose. “What? No. I know you wouldn’t be into her or something. She’s a girl. And we have our...” He gestures, like he’s conjuring up an imaginary contract. Their deal. Their arrangement. “You know. I know you wouldn’t do anything. Move, I need that sock.”

“I’m sorry, *I* need that sock. It’s part of my bed. And it - hey! Thief.”

Mike swats him with the pilfered sock and folds it with its mate.

It’s heartening to hear that Mike trusts him, and for a moment Will basks in that. But there’s something Mike’s not saying, and after some deliberation Will pokes the bear. “But...?”

“But what?”

“That’s what I’m asking you, doofus.”

“*Nothing*,” Mike insists, in a tone that says, *Oh, believe me, there’s something*.

Will sighs and finally abandons his nest of warm fabric. He flops across the bed to sling an arm around Mike’s neck, puckering his lips theatrically. “What, am I not paying enough attention to you?”

“Fuck off,” Mike laughs, shoving at him. “It’s *nothing*. You just disappeared a lot this week, that’s all.”

Will bats his eyelashes, still in corny joking mode. “Did you miss me?”

Mike shrugs with one shoulder. "Yeah."

Will's theatrics drop like a mask, and he blinks at his partner with a sore kind of tenderness materializing in his chest.

Oh.

Mike isn't jealous, he was lonely.

Will has been spending a lot of time with Max for the past couple weeks. Enough that Lucas actually accused Will of "stealing his ex," which they gagged and laughed about later. They've been talking. Sharing stories, swapping secrets. Max has been teaching him how to use spray paint. Will showed her the back corner of the bookstore where sometimes, *sometimes* you can find gay pulp novels in the bargain bin if you're really determined. Max begrudgingly allowed Will to do her makeup, drawing on his paltry experience from recent Halloweens, and she took her revenge by making him try to skateboard.

He ate shit.

His elbow still hurts.

She looked good in the dark eyeshadow, though.

"Oh," he says aloud. "Well. I'm sorry."

Mike shakes his head with another, looser shrug, turning back to the now-unoccupied pile. "'S'not something you need to be sorry about."

"But you're upset."

"I'm not upset." Mike's voice has started to rise with frustration, and he visibly takes a second to ground himself. "I'm not upset. I promise."

"But you're *sad*." Will wriggles himself into Mike's space, butting his head into the way of Mike's laundry-folding to lay his head on his lap. Mike looks down at him with a small, exasperated smile quirking up one side of his lips, and Will lifts a hand to run the pad of his thumb over that smile. Mike kisses the thumb. Will's heart swells

painfully. "What can I do? I wanna fix it."

"I'm not sad, I'm fine."

Will fixes him with his best unimpressed stare.

Mike's head swivels, and he tosses his hands in a *Hell if I know* gesture. "I dunno. Do you wanna go out tomorrow?"

Will blinks at the phrasing. He knows Mike just meant *hang* out. Like usual. But he said *go* out. Like a date.

He licks the backs of his teeth, wondering how far to push his luck. It's been a good day; it's Friday, and Fridays are always good days. And they've both been in a good mood since school ended, talking themselves hoarse and laughing so hard they cried over a typo in a comic book. They had a tickle fight just before this, which ended in a stalemate and lots of kisses. Will has been comfortable enough to play cute, burying himself in the laundry like a cat and batting his eyelashes flirtatiously. Is he comfortable enough to risk this?

Well, he's not likely to get a better opportunity.

"On a date?"

He says it quietly, not quite brave enough to be brazen about it. From his vantage point in Mike's lap, he can see Mike's head tilt as he looks down at him. He drops the hand that had been absentmindedly tracing over Mike's features, suddenly shy.

"Oh." Mike reaches for a towel, keeping his hands occupied like he does when he's a little uncomfortable. "I guess. Yeah."

A smile creeps over Will's face. He knows Mike doesn't mean it. Not like that. Or at least, he's just going along with it to please Will. But he'll take what he can get.

And he won't push the issue.

Instead of saying, *Really? Like a real date?*, he just pillows his head more comfortably on Mike's thighs and says, "What do you wanna do?"

---

They don't usually sleep in Mike's room.

Usually, if they're having a sleepover at the Wheeler house, they're in the basement. But Mike has been having trouble sleeping, and trying to do it on the floor or on the old, creaky couch down there won't help. So they stayed upstairs tonight.

It's weird. Will doesn't think they've slept together in this bed before. Just his own bed, back home, and in sleeping bags on the ground.

The shapes and angles of Mike's room are at once familiar and strange in the semi-darkness. The grayish-blue walls, the Dark Crystal poster that's been there for years, the pattern of knots in the honey-brown wood of his dresser and desk and bed. The books and games lying haphazardly on his wall shelf. The science fair trophies. The crack in the ceiling that's been there as long as Will can remember. He used to be afraid of it, when he was little. He thought that spiders would start crawling out.

It's odd, sleeping here, together in Mike's too-small twin bed for the first time since they were little. They used to share this bed fairly often. But they were much smaller then, and the bed seemed much bigger. Now, there's no real way to arrange themselves without being pressed up against each other.

Will shifts. Ironically, Mike and his sleeping issues seem to be conked out already. Will, not so much. Karen Wheeler is more likely to barge into a bedroom unannounced come morning than Joyce. And they get the feeling that the Wheelers would be far less forgiving of their arrangement than his own mother or brother would be. But they pushed Mike's desk in front of the door, barricading it from surprise-visits, and they set Mike's alarm clock to go off early. They'll be presentable before anyone else is awake.

With how twitchy Mike was about it, Will is surprised he's asleep right now. But, he supposes, they did take precautions. If Mrs. Wheeler decides to wake them up bright and early on a Saturday morning for whatever godforsaken reason, the noise of the door hitting the desk will give them ample time to scramble apart before she even begins to enter.



Will snuggles in further under the blankets. He's not used to sleeping with the quiet gurgle of the fish tank. Mike used to have a little terrarium in his room, housing two shy little hermit crabs named Yip and Yep. Nine year old Mike named them after the martians on Sesame Street because they looked so alien. They lived for a good few years, but near the end of middle school Yip and Yep returned to their home planet and the terrarium was replaced by a tank.

Now, a softly rippling blue light emanates from the watery home of Prince Caspian the Beta Fish, Handsomest and Angriest Fish In All the Land and Sea. Normally Mike would turn it off at night, but with Will's aversion to complete darkness, they left it on. Caspian flits back and forth through the water, his bright blue Fins of Magnificence dragging behind him, and Will debates getting up to turn off the light. Are they keeping the fish awake?

Do fish sleep?

Maybe he'll ask Dustin next time they talk. Dustin would know.

Mike rolls over in his sleep, face-planting in the pillow with a grunt, and pulls Will to him like a heat-seeking missile. Will lets himself be pulled in, and tries to sleep.

---

In Will's dream, he's trying to find his way around a water park. He has his supercomm, for some reason, and he's radioing the Party, trying to figure out where the hell they are. He thinks maybe he's at the wrong park, or *they're* at the wrong park, or they're all at different parks. The signs in his park all say *H2Whoa, That Was Fun!*, but his mom said she's at *Water Land*, and Dustin said he's at *Water Ocean World*, which seems redundant. An extra friend, somebody that's always been part of the Party but that he doesn't think he's ever seen before, radios in to say they're at *Wet and Wild*, and Max and Lucas and El are all at the *Slip and Slide*.

It's stressful and confusing - moreso because the park keeps changing, and all at once he turns around and realizes it's empty. He's been wandering around an empty water park this whole time, after hours, the blue-ish lights illuminating the abandoned space, and his pulse jumps. Is he in the Upside Down? He whirls - he thinks he can see

vines and spores now, although some part of him is vaguely aware that he thought those into existence.

He flees to the nearest building he can find, which turns out to be a gift shop full of Disney World merchandise, and it's there that he finds his best friend.

"Hey," Mike says with a smile. He's in swim trunks, his sunglasses pushed back on his head to hold his bangs out of his face, and he seems unworried by the dark and empty state of the park. "Did you find El yet? She was buying hot dogs."

He comes to stand behind Will, wrapping him in a hug, and Will leans into it with a wave of relief. "No, I was just looking. Mikey, I think we're at the wrong park."

"Sokay, we can just take the ride."

Mike gestures behind them and sure enough, in the back of the gift shop there's the boarding platform for the Disney World ride that connects all the water parks. Of course. It was silly of him to worry.

They climb into their mechanical boat. Will sits on Mike's lap, which is okay because nobody else is here, so no one will see them. The boat chugs off slowly into the dark tunnel, and Will leans back against Mike. Something's pressing against him, a buckle maybe. It's digging against his ass, making it difficult to get comfortable.

He reaches back to brush it away, only to find himself blocked by something warm and soft and solid. A body. Mike's body. But lying down horizontal, not sitting upright in a Disney-esque ride.

Reality overlaps and meshes with dream-state as he becomes aware of the bed, and the blankets impeding his movements, and the warm body of his partner heavy against his back. Will would sink back into sleep, returning to the boat ride, but Mike is moving too. Shifting and sighing like he's trying to get comfortable. And that thing is still prodding at Will's ass cheeks, whatever it -

... oh.

*Oh.*

Instantly, he's awake.

At first he's not sure if he dreamed it. It can't be what he thinks it is. But then Mike sighs and tightens the arm around Will's waist, drawing him in more firmly with a sleepy, snuggling motion, and the rigid shape digs into Will's flesh again and he thinks he might pass out.

Mike must be asleep. He's *gotta* be asleep. There's absolutely no way in hell that he knows what he's doing.

Will licks his dry lips, staring at the wall opposite the bed. The vague shapes of Mike's posters stare back. "Mike?"

The whisper was as quiet as he could manage while still being at all audible.

No answer. Mike's breath continues to jet softly against Will's neck, just below his ear.

He tries again, just *slightly* louder. "Mike?"

This time Mike twitches, gives a faint little groan, and - oh, fuck shit hell - starts to push his hips against Will in a slow, offbeat rhythm.

Will has to bite down on his hand to keep a groan of his own from slipping out. He knows it's wrong of him, he knows Mike has no clue what he's doing, but he can't help it. He's starting to... react. His nerves are lighting up, his flesh growing warm and sensitive and almost ticklish where Mike is pressing against him, automatic arousal beginning to tent his own pajama pants.

Should he be stopping this? Should he wake Mike up? Should he just leave?

And do what? Go where? Sleep on the floor? They didn't bring in any extra blankets or pillows. Go to the basement? That would be hard to explain in the morning, and he doesn't want Mike to wake up partway through the night to an empty bed with no explanation.

But he can *not* just wake Mike up and face that conversation. So, he bites down on his hand and stifles a short moan as Mike's boner -

jesus christ, that's really what it is, isn't it? - presses against him again.

Will has glimpsed Mike's dick before, briefly, in locker rooms or while changing into pajamas. But it was never on purpose, and it was never like, well, like *this*. He's never seen Mike hard. And he's certainly never *felt* him.

But now he is. He's feeling the length and shape and heat of Mike's dick against his ass, separated only by two thin layers of fabric, and the thought has him allllll kinds of horny.

Will unlocks his jaw, feeling damp teeth marks throb in the flesh of his hand. The pain didn't distract him nearly as much as he hoped.

He just has to wait this out. That's all. He just has to sit it out and wait for Mike to stop dreaming about... whatever he's dreaming about.

Or *whoever* he's dreaming about.

Will pants at a swell of stupid, unwanted pleasure, breathing through it, trying valiantly not to squirm back against the stimulus. His heart is racing, pulse tapping out a swift tattoo under his skin. He can feel it throb in the flesh of his backside, which is so not helping his predicament right now.

Who does Mike think he's grinding against right now?

A thought jumps to mind - a stupid thought, one that he pushes away quickly. Could Mike be dreaming about him? They are partners, after all. They spend a lot of time together. And Mike appears in Will's dreams; is it really such a stretch that Will would appear in his?

Yes. Yes, it is, because Mike's subconscious wouldn't be fantasizing about Will like that. Mike wouldn't be dreaming about a *guy* like that. He probably thinks he's pressed up against some curvy dream-girl with soft hair and sweet perfume. Breasts. A slick cleft between her legs instead of a hard shaft standing at attention.

Because that's the situation that Will has to deal with, now.

And then, just when he thought things couldn't get worse, Mike begins to speed up. He's getting louder, his clipped little noises of enjoyment becoming more frequent, and Will covers his own mouth with both hands. He doesn't blame Mike. It probably feels a lot better than a pillow, having a flesh-and-blood human to grind against. Warm and real and yielding. And he's more pleased than he should be that Mike likes the way that he feels.

Mike's lazy rocking motion escalates abruptly into a sharper, swifter movement, a *thrust*, and this time Will does make a noise into his hands. His dick is chafing against his pajama pants, as sensitized as he's become, and he swears to himself he'll duck into the bathroom the *moment* this is over. As soon as Mike stops, and he can pull away unnoticed, he'll sneak to the downstairs bathroom and - would that be far enough? - the basement bathroom, maybe, just so there's no risk of anyone hearing him, and he'll -

Mike goes still very abruptly. Will freezes too. He can still feel Mike hard against him, prodding at one of his ass cheeks, so he knows Mike didn't, well, finish. He's trying to figure out what's going on, keeping as still as he can, when he realizes Mike's breathing has changed.

Will's stomach flips. Butterflies swarm in his guts and travel up to his brain, fogging his thoughts with panic.

He doesn't think Mike is asleep anymore.

That sinking suspicion is confirmed when he feels Mike release a sharp breath against his neck, and the arm that had been holding Will suddenly loosens.

"Shit," Mike hisses, very, very quietly.

The arm, very slowly and very softly, begins to lift. Mike's hips pull back, away from Will's body.

But then Mike stops. Will realizes why half a second later. Stupid idiot that he is, he forgot to feign sleep. He's not moving or anything, but he's very clearly not relaxed. He's stiff as a board on the mattress, barely breathing, shoulders tense and hands still clapped over his

mouth.

Not exactly the picture of peaceful slumber.

Mike doesn't move. Will doesn't move. They both know the other is awake. Neither knows what the hell to do.

After what feels like hours, Will hears Mike swallow. He hears the tiny sound of lips parting over teeth.

"Will?"

It's the quietest whisper imaginable - the exact mirror of what Will whispered just minutes ago.

*Mike?*

He could bullshit. He could slowly relax his muscles and try not to move and pretend he was asleep the whole time. Mike might buy it. He probably won't. But neither of them would say shit about it in the morning.

The mattress under them dips a little, and Will gets the distinct impression that Mike is leaning over him, trying to see his face. Trying to see if his eyes are open.

Moment of truth.

Mike's about to find out anyway.

Will lowers his hands from his mouth, and with the movement, he feels Mike go tense as a wire behind him as he realizes that Will is awake.

There's no good way to salvage this situation.

And maybe he's just drunk on lust and sleep loss, but Will thinks, *May as well fuck it up a little more. How much worse could this get?*

"You, um," he whispers, voice unsteady even at a whisper. He digs deep and accesses all the courage he has to say, "You don't have to stop."

Hours pass. Days. Years. Will actually begins to imagine that Mike is a statue behind him, that this is some nightmare where he'll turn around and find his lover turned to stone. He wants to turn and look, but somehow can't bring himself to do it. Some irrational, childish part of him feels like if he turns, if he looks, he'll break whatever spell they're under and everything will come crashing down.

Mike is stuck, frozen in his own circular thoughts, paralyzed. Will can tell. He can also tell that Mike's erection has not flagged. Mike didn't manage to pull all the way away before realizing that Will wasn't actually asleep. It's not pressed up against him anymore, but Will can still feel the tip of it, dragging just slightly against the cleft of his ass. He can't control the shiver that runs through him.

He pushes back. Just a little, *just* enough to put a little pressure on the head. Mike breathes in sharply.

For a moment, Will thinks he's about to be kicked out of bed. Mike has gone entirely silent, entirely motionless, and that's never a good sign with Mike. He's usually so expressive; if he shuts down completely it's because he's struggling with something *big*. Will just hopes it isn't anger. He can reassure Mike if he's embarrassed. He can laugh it off if he's amused. But Will doesn't know what he'll do if Mike is mad at him for this. Is he supposed to apologize? What is he supposed to apologize for? The offer, maybe, although he's starting to wonder if he said it at all, based on how long Mike has been silent.

And then, finally, *finally*, Mike moves. It feels like an unintentional movement, just a little twitch of the hips. But it seems to break Mike out of whatever coma he's trapped in.

"Jesus Christ, Will, are you sure?"

Will could sing, hearing those words. He could leap up and dance. He could fly. Mike is considering it. This doesn't have to end in blundering embarrassment and stiff conversation over breakfast. This could - they could - this could be a good thing, maybe. This could be something they both want. Even if what Mike wants is just a warm body to finish getting off with, and not Will in particular.

"Yeah."

There's another long pause, and Will is tired of long pauses. He's nervous and he's tired and he's horny as all fucking hell and he just wants to move forward. Mike's arm is still hovering above him, not touching him, like Mike is too shellshocked to even put it down. Will reaches up with a shaking hand, interlaces their fingers, and starts to tug.

"It's okay," he whispers hoarsely. "I don't mind."

Mike resists for one, two, three, four, five fast heartbeats. And then - miracle of miracles - he relents. Settling stiffly back into place behind Will, allowing Will to snug their linked hands against his chest where his heart is endeavouring to beat through his ribs.

But he still won't *move*, even though his hard-on strains against Will's body. It's up to Will to swivel his hips back, moving gingerly in case Mike changes his mind and yanks away. But he doesn't. He allows Will to rock back against him, once, twice. Three times. Four. And then he bends his head, his hot, damp breath jetting once more against Will's neck, leaving goosebumps. And the next time Will presses back, Mike tightens his grip and pushes forward.

If he wasn't so turned on, Will might celebrate. Because at least now he's just horny, instead of horny and terrified.

Mike doesn't say anything. Will didn't really expect him to. He just rocks against Will again, consciously this time, breathing hard little breaths out against his neck. And Will, for his part, well, he maybe shouldn't be so *astronomically* aroused by this. The pressure against his ass, the hard object digging into him, sliding against him rhythmically, is almost more than he can bear. Pleasure is beginning to bloom in earnest now, warming and buzzing in his lower abdomen, making him bite his lip against the pathetic sound he almost made. He's moving a little with Mike's thrusts, his whole body rocking minutely back and forth as Mike bucks against him, seeming to lose more inhibitions by the second. Mike's body is unclenching, relaxing against Will, no longer quite so on edge.

Will's dick bobs with every wave of motion. It *hurts*. He's so hard he's leaking, he can feel the head getting plastered to his pajama pants with precome, and he's rubbing against the fabric in all the wrong



ways. He wants to take himself in hand, pump himself to the beat of Mike's hips - but that would be too weird, he thinks. Mike might be too weirded out by that. He might even be disgusted.

But, *fuck*, he's got to get some sort of relief soon. Mike's scent is all around him, the scent of Mike's bed and his dormant body and his stale breath, and Will swears he smells different. He swears Mike smells different when he's turned on, darker almost, muskier. Mike's breath is panting in Will's ear and his arm is hooked around his waist, holding him in place, holding him close, and his warmth is all over, in the bed and in the blankets and most of all pressed up behind Will like a furnace. Will is starting to sweat, breathing pretty hard himself as a dull, tantalizing, unsatisfying pleasure resonates in his core. He wants more, *needs* more, and for just a moment he's weak. His other hand, the one not holding Mike's, dips down and palms himself through his pajamas.

He hisses at the feeling, feeling himself twitch at the slight hint of sensation. And maybe that's what draws Mike's attention.

Mike's head lifts, moves, like he's looking down Will's body. Will realizes Mike is watching him palm himself and withdraws, embarrassed, trying and failing to play it off. When Mike pulls his hand away from Will's he turns his face into the pillow, feeling the sting of rejection.

Instead of pulling away, Mike slips his own hand down the front of Will's body.

Will realizes what's happening just as Mike's hand hovers over the tent in his pajamas. He doesn't even hesitate or question it. He needs this, that pressure, that friction, and if Mike is willing to provide it...

Will lets his head drop back, closing his eyes as his hips toss up against Mike's hovering hand, making brief and wonderful contact. Mike correctly interprets that as a *yes*.

The soft, warm pressure of a palm comes down over Will's dick, feeling him over the pajamas, and he can't even find it in him to regret the little moan that buzzes behind his molars.

Mike makes a sound in return, a throaty kind of murmur, and Will can't suppress the thrust he gives when Mike's hand starts pressing down a little harder, fingers curling to scope out his shape and feel. He worries, suddenly, if he measures up. It's hard to tell, just from Mike grinding against his ass, but he thinks Mike feels bigger than him.

Mike grips him through the fabric, his hips rolling and snapping against the soft part of Will's backside, imitating something far more intense, and Will gasps out, "God, Mike."

He's embarrassed as soon as it comes out of his mouth, but Mike shudders behind him, tucking his face into Will's shoulder with a close-mouthed groan.

Will writhes in place, canting back against the pulse of firm pressure against his ass, then forward against the sharp-sweet pleasure of Mike's hand rubbing and gripping him through the fabric of his pajamas. It's not nearly enough and all too much at the same time, and when he makes another noise Mike's free hand comes up to muffle it.

"Shh," Mike hisses, and Will remembers distantly that they're in a house with other people in it.

He wants to open his mouth and suck on the fingers brushing his lips. He doesn't. Even in his blissed-out state he knows that would be too far.

That doesn't keep him from imagining it as he feels a familiar tightening near the base of his spine.

Fuck, this is good. Better than he could have imagined. Mike isn't even properly touching him and still it's better than any solo jack-off in memory. Something about the unknown makes everything so much more intense. He doesn't know what Mike is going to do next or what it'll feel like. Not to mention it's *Mike* doing this. Not just a random, unimportant pair of hands touching him, but Mike's hands. Mike. Awake and aware and -

Will convulses as Mike suddenly feels out the tip of him and begins

rubbing circles over the cloth-covered head with his thumb. He's trembling with release before he knows it, fighting tooth and nail not to be loud, awash in the lightning bolt of pleasure. Holy shit. Fucking hell. How did Mike know to do that? How did he know Will likes that? He must like it, too. He must do it to himself, when he touches himself.

Will makes a mental note to try it, if he's ever allowed to do anything even vaguely sexual with Mike again.

He comes down slowly, the muscles in his abdomen and thighs trembling a little, and realizes vaguely that Mike has gone boneless as well. He's panting against Will's hair now, no longer moving. Will tilts his hips back to confirm, and Mike hisses as Will presses against a limp - and damp - member.

And speaking of damp, these pajamas are... gonna be a problem.

They're both breathing hard for a minute. Will searches for something to say. What the hell do you say after that? Thank you?

He swallows. His mouth feels dry and tacky from breathing through it. "Your fish is staring at us."

They both lift their heads, meeting the reproachful bulge-eyed gaze of Caspian.

Mike slowly lifts the duvet over their heads, shielding them from fishy judgement, and they both giggle.

"I'll have to borrow some pajamas," Will admits quietly, a little sheepish about his behavior now that he's no longer all pumped up on lust.

"Yeah." Mike sounds a little too formal, and Will wilts. "Right."

A few moments pass, and neither of them move. Will's stomach ties up in knots again, hoping against hope that this isn't gonna ruin anything.

"I don't wanna get out of bed," Mike says after a moment, laughing at himself a little. "It's cold out there."

“I can get them.”

Will starts slipping out from under the blankets. He’s not sleeping in wet, come-stained pajamas. He’s just not.

But a hand on his elbow stops him. For the first time since he woke up, he turns around.

Mike looks exactly as good as Will imagined. Hair a mess, cheeks flushed, eyes dark as the space between stars in the low light. He doesn’t quite meet Will’s eyes as he says, “We could just... not bother with them.”

“With pajamas?” Then Will gets it. “Oh. Yeah. Sure.”

He shrugs like it’s no biggie, like his heart isn’t starting to pound again. And when Mike sits halfway up to pull his shirt over his head, and then pushes his pajama pants down his hips and wriggles out of them like it’s nothing, Will tries not to show that he’s screaming inside. He just shucks his own shirt, takes a deep breath, and peels the soiled pants from his body, using the dry legs to clean himself up as best he can.

Whatever he expected when he finally threw his clothes on the floor near-ish to the hamper and turned back around, it wasn’t an invitation to be held.

Will freezes, all kinds of uncertainties sloshing around inside him. It’s been almost a full day since his last shower now. What if he smells? What if he’s sweaty and gross? What if his belly has just a little too much fat over it, or his acne is too visible, or the moles scattered over his skin are too weird? What if his spine shows through his skin too much, or the scar on his side is too memory-inducing?

But it would be worse to turn away. So he eases forward into Mike’s arms, trying to convince himself this is just like any other time.

It’s not.

This feels almost more intimate than what they just did. More vulnerable, more open, maybe, than grinding against each other fully clothed, back-to-front, not looking at each other. Now they’re face-to-

face, trusting each other with their bare bodies, and there's something special about it, about the immediate warmth of skin on skin. It's like... well, there's nothing else Will has experienced that's quite like this.

They can't really see much. It's dark, they're under the covers, and they're too close to get a good look anyway. But Will can see a little, and he can feel *everything* where they press up against each other, and that's more than enough.

He rests his forehead against Mike's shoulder and tries to quiet his racing mind. He was nervous about this part. The after-part. He was afraid Mike would turn his back and refuse to acknowledge Will after that, or scoot to the other side of the bed with a stiff *good night*, or even get dressed and leave. The fact that he's staying, that he's *holding* Will, naked in the sheets like a lover - it's enough to make Will's chest ache.

Will's hands roam over the skin now bared to him as he finally begins to drift towards sleep again. He's just exploring, feeling out what he hasn't been able to touch before this - stomach, ribs, hips, thighs - when his fingers run over something he can't identify. Smooth little patches of skin, maybe three or four of them, on Mike's hips and thighs. He strokes the pads of his fingers over them, puzzling over them.

He finds more on Mike's shoulders, and he realizes all at once -

Burn scars.

"Those were the worst ones," Mike mutters, seeming to track Will's train of thought. "Most of them would go away completely after a few weeks, so no one noticed. Those ones scarred, though. I guess I went overboard."

The way he says it is so casual, so horribly casual - *I guess I went overboard*, the same way he'd talk about overeating or over-planning a campaign.

Will doesn't think before he kisses him. He doesn't even think about how it's different, kissing in just their skin. He's too mad at himself.

He dips down to kiss the shiny little patches of skin on Mike's shoulders, the one's he's *seen* before, the ones he brushed off when Mike gave a paper-thin explanation about skin being scraped off in a bike accident. He never knew. He never asked. He should have asked. He should have known something was wrong.

He comes up to kiss Mike on the mouth again, and Mike runs his palms up the bare skin of Will's back, making him shiver.

But he won't let Mike distract him. Not yet.

"Please don't do that anymore," he whispers as they break apart.

Mike opens and closes his mouth a few times, his eyes troubled in the dim blue light of the tank. He dips his head in a half nod, then looks Will in the eye. "I'll... try."

They kiss again, then. And again. And this time they have plenty of opportunity to explore the novelty of making out in the nude.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I literally have not proofread this, because it is 2:00am. I am sorry.

Enjoy.

As always, I love to hear your thoughts!